



# TAKING STOCK:

## Considering the Role of Psychological Research in the Fight for Social Justice

LUCAS GOODWIN, MA

2021 Patricia M. Bricklin Student Ethics Award Recipient

What part will psychological research play in the fight for social justice? In “The Role of the Behavioral Scientist in the Civil Rights Movement” (1968), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. evokes the “tremendous responsibility” that sits on the shoulders of social scientists in, “moulding the minds of young men and women all over our country,” (p. 180). Dr. King insists that because of this responsibility, which is a form of power, the social sciences must play a critical role in advancing the civil rights movement. Not only are the social sciences to provide African Americans with a sense of “direction” and “self-understanding,” qualities that the assaults of interpersonal and systemic racism have largely denied them; the social sciences are to open White America’s eyes to the brutal realities of racism by, “carefully document[ing]” racist phenomena such that they become “consequently more difficult to reject” (King Jr., 1968, p. 180). Dr. King (1968) hoped that through these efforts, and other forms of engagement with the civil rights movement, the social sciences would eventually enable the American public to arrive at an experience of “cosmic discontent,” the profound sense of psychological and moral disease that arises in the face of racial injustice, and a necessary predicate to large-scale social change (p. 184).

Although Dr. King addressed the role of the social sciences in the civil rights

movement over 50 years ago, his reflections on the matter are as relevant today as ever. Sadly, “the problem,” systemic racism, remains “deep ... gigantic in extent, and chaotic in detail” (King, 1968, p. 184). Even if the legal rights of African Americans have decidedly grown over the years, the persistence of racial discrimination in all aspects of contemporary American society (Alexander, 2010; Feagin, 2001) highlights the extent to which Dr. King’s goal of racial equality has yet to be realized. Working within the framework Dr. King (1968) provides, it seems that the social sciences have been somewhat unsuccessful influencing public opinion and furthering the aims of justice. Therefore, the social

sciences, and psychological science in particular, must decide how to respond today to the systemic inequalities and racial violence that continue to plague American society.

Given current understandings of racism and equality, how might the psychological research community adapt its approach to the study of racist phenomena in order to prove a more effective force for social change? What ethical and methodological frameworks will guide this shift in psychological research as the field reengages the fight for social justice? And crucially, how might psychological research best facilitate the experience of “cosmic discontent” that Dr. King refers to, and in



so doing, inch America ever closer to the fulfillment of its “destiny,” which, as Dr. King (1968) reminds us, is still “freedom” (p. 185)?

Fortunately, great ethical and methodological strides have been made in the social sciences in the last 50 years that may aid the psychological research community in its renewed fight for social justice. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Mikesell et al., 2013; Wallerstein, 2021), participatory action research (PAR) (Brydon-Miller, 1997), and critical participatory policy research (CPPR) (Fine, 2013) are but a few of the research models to have emerged in this time that may currently be of use. Although each of these research models has a distinct history, and thus reflects a unique approach to social scientific enquiry, they share many of the same ethical and methodological principles, as well as research aims.

CBPR, PAR, and CPPR tend to be implemented in, and with, communities that have suffered the most from systemic inequalities. By blurring the line between the researcher and the researched, allowing community members to actively participate as equals throughout the research process, CBPR, PAR, and CPPR seek to empower community partners by creating platforms for community members’ unique experiences and concerns. It is hoped that by giving voice to these perspectives, perspectives that have traditionally been sidelined by the social sciences, the systemic conditions responsible for a community’s particular struggles may be more effectively identified and, eventually, redressed. In this regard, CBPR, PAR, and CPPR serve an explicitly activist function; that is, these research models have been designed to actively confront systems of social control and oppression for the sake of positive social change.

In addition to empowering communities and enacting social change, CBPR, PAR, and CPPR strive to promote trust between the social sciences and communities that have, historically, suffered “research abuse” (Lucero et al., 2020, as cited in Wallerstein,

2021, p. 251). Furthermore, these research models aim to improve cultural humility and awareness within the social sciences and to develop critical consciousness, the mode of consciousness required for truly liberatory psychological and social transformation (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Martín-Baró, 1994). In order to achieve these goals without doing further harm to the communities in question, CBPR, PAR, and CPPR rely heavily on the ethics of collaboration (Mikesell et al., 2013) and participation (Fine, 2013) to inform both research methods and the researcher’s manner of engagement with community members and research participants. As such, these ethical principles entail both methodological and interpersonal practices rooted in transparency, mutuality, and shared experience and leadership (Mikesell et al., 2013) and often require “ongoing discussions about power, ownership, and control” (Fine, 2013, p. 696).

Research models such as CBPR, PAR, and CPPR offer the psychological research community an exceedingly ethical and rigorous means of addressing social justice issues. Moreover, these approaches to scientific enquiry reflect a significant shift that has taken place in the social sciences since the civil rights movement. By practicing the ethics of community engagement (Mikesell et al., 2013) and challenging the institutional, political, and cultural norms that define mainstream social scientific research, CBPR, PAR, and CPPR may be seen as effectively democratizing the research process and in so doing, directly confronting those systems of oppression of which the social sciences are but a part. This shift not only signals a highly refined degree of reflexivity that was presumably absent from social scientific research in Dr. King’s day; it suggests that as research models, CBPR, PAR, and CPPR are particularly well suited to the challenges posed by a systemic construction of racism, that is, the dominant construction of racism in social scientific discourse today.

If the psychological research community

is to engage the fight for social justice, will it employ the most effective tools at its disposal? Will these tools be sturdy enough to enlarge the sense of “cosmic discontent ... in the bosoms of people of good will all over this nation” (King, 1968, p. 184)? Will these tools be sharp enough to deliver America to the “freedom” that Dr. King saw as its “destiny” (1968, p. 185)? And will these tools be wielded in such a way that we “emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man, into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice” (King, 1968, p. 185). There’s only one way to find out.

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Brydon-Miller, M. (1997). Participatory action research Psychology and social change. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 657-666.
- Feagin, J.R. (2001). *Racist in America: Roots, current realities, & future reparations*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fine, M. (2013). Echoes of Bedford: A 20-year social psychology memoir on participatory action research hatched behind bars. *American Psychologist*, 68, 688-698. doi: 10.1037/a0034359
- King, M. L. Jr. (1968). The role of the behavioral scientist in the civil rights movement. *American Psychologist*, 23(3), 180-186.
- Martín-Baró, I. (1994). *Writings for a liberation psychology* (A. Aron & S. Corne, Eds.). Harvard University Press.
- Mikesell, L., Bromley, E., & Khodyakov, D. (2013). Ethical community-engaged research: A literature review. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(12), e7-e14. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2013.301605
- Wallerstein, N. (2021). Engage for equity: Advancing the fields of community-based participatory research and community-engaged research in community psychology and the social sciences. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 67, 251-255. doi: 10.1002/ajcp.12530