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# De-growth and critical community psychology: Contributions towards individual and social well-being



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 September 2015

Received in revised form 22 March 2016

Accepted 22 March 2016

Available online 1 April 2016

### Keywords:

Degrowth

Critical community psychology

Well-being

Decolonisation of the imaginary

Reciprocity

Social justice

## ABSTRACT

This contribution sets out to combine the perspective of the degrowth paradigm with that of Critical Community psychology. Following the degrowth argument, the advancement of human well-being calls for a shift from growth-based societies to ones grounded in the ethos of degrowth. In this regard, we acknowledge the necessity for both theoretical principles and examples of good practice, which can lead to this transition. To this end, the article combines some of the underlying principles of the degrowth paradigm (i.e. decolonisation of the imaginary, reciprocity and conviviality, and environmental sustainability) with those of Critical Community Psychology, as well as, in one case, of Liberation Psychology (i.e. conscientisation and de-ideologisation, responsible togetherness, and environmental justice). This integration intends to equip academic scholars, practitioners, and social activists with visions and practices for the implementation of strategic actions aimed at individual and social well-being. The article concludes with a thorough reflection on social justice and how to better promote it through the combined contributions of both degrowth and Critical Community psychology.

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## 1. Introduction

The recent increases in environmental degradation and inequality of access to resources and knowledge, as well as the negative effects of the global financial crisis, all raise increasing concerns about the extent to which the current growth-based and market-driven economic system is able to bring about individual and social well-being (Matthey, 2010; Stiglitz, 2010). This state of affairs is urging scholars from different disciplines, policy-makers, and citizens of various nationalities to provide a radical revision of our current way of life.<sup>1</sup>

In line with this vision, the degrowth paradigm presents itself as an alternative to the current social apparatus and the problems that it is causing (Latouche, 2009). Degrowth has been defined as an alternative society based on “an equitable down-scaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term” (Schneider, Kallis, & Martínez-Alier, 2010, p. 512). It is also both an expanding philosophy and a social movement that envisages a society that rejects the hegemony of Western neoliberal and capitalistic market models. Drawing on Flipo's (2007) work, Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova, and Martí-nez-Alier (2013) identified a

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<sup>1</sup> See, by way of example, the recently released ‘Paris climate change agreement’ drafted by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 2015) between November and December 2015.

minimum of six ‘degrowth streams’: ecology, critiques of development and praise for anti-utilitarianism, the meaning of life and well-being, bioeconomics, democracy, and justice.

In spite of its overtly revolutionary nature (Ott, 2012, p. 571), degrowth is open to contributions from other scholarship provided that they are not simply false alternatives that would only ameliorate the status quo without undermining the framework upon which it is built (Martínez-Alier, 2009; Martínez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien, & Zaccai, 2010; Trainer, 2012).

In light of this, in this contribution we propose to integrate the approach of degrowth with that of Critical Community psychology (CCP). Community Psychology in its critical variant<sup>2</sup> is an emerging approach particularly committed to promoting individual and social well-being through the adoption of an ecological, justice-oriented, and value-based perspective (Arcidiacono & Di Martino, 2016; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). According to Burton, Boyle, Harris, and Kagan (2007, p. 219) *Community Psychology “emphasises a level of analysis and intervention other than the individual and their immediate interpersonal context” as well as being “... concerned with how people feel, think, experience, and act as they work together, resisting oppression and struggling to create a better world”*.

This approach also holds that well-being is strongly dependent on the resources of the environment as well as opportunities to access them. In this view, Critical Community psychologists work on promoting quality of life through the advancement of justice, democracy, environmental preservation, development of capabilities, and freedom of choice (Fox et al., 2009). Moreover, CCP adopts an ecological perspective to interpret social phenomena (Kelly, 1966). In terms of interventions geared to the furtherance of well-being and life satisfaction, this entails CCP overcoming individual levels of analysis to encompass groups, communities, organisations, and ultimately society at large (Prilleltensky, 2012). Furthermore, this approach maintains a strong focus on primary prevention as well as competence, empowerment, and heightened resilience (Cowen, 2000).

Based on the above arguments, we believe that there are a number of reasons for combining the approaches of degrowth and CCP. First, a critical perspective combining the vision of Community psychology can be considered a valuable ally for the degrowth movement, in that it assumes that the promotion of better societies entails challenging the status quo and providing an antidote to co-optation. At the same time, it requires sustaining a perpetual critique of professional and theoretical assumptions inherent in academic practices, and promoting interdisciplinarity (Davidson et al., 2006). It follows that this approach, like degrowth, often brings into question cultural, economic, and political principles as well as those assumptions underpinning our societal system, including the belief in growth for the sake of growth (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010, pp. 336–339).

Second, both degrowth and CCP strive to understand individual and social phenomena from a multilevel and ecological perspective. In that regard, CCP has developed a strong focus on the micro- and meso-levels (Burton, 2015a), as well as a number of techniques and good practices for community building, together with empowerment, care, and support for activists (Kloos et al., 2012). On the other hand, CCP may benefit from degrowth's vision, which adds to its small-scale practical interventions a general social and economic theory that analyses the societal and global aspects of unsustainable social and economic systems (Demaria et al., 2013).

Third, the degrowth paradigm has advocated on more than one occasion the need to shift towards more cooperative, community-based, and participatory ways of living (García, 2012; Trainer, 2012). Importantly, these are among the principles that CP and its critical variant have championed since their origin in an attempt to improve life conditions for individuals and communities (Fox et al., 2009; Kloos et al., 2012; Orford, 2008).

Lastly, degrowth has often expressed its strong commitment to promoting well-being and quality of life by revisiting the foundations of our current societal system (Andreoni & Galmarini, 2013; Bilancini & D'Alessandro, 2012). In the same vein, CCP has repeatedly upheld the need for more transformative – rather than just ameliorative – strategic interventions for the promotion of human well-being. In this regard, it has developed tools and practices aimed at generating real change (Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddiquee, 2011; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010).

Based on the above arguments, in the following pages we shall attempt to identify the linkage between these two approaches as well as the benefits that their alliance can yield in terms of advancement in human quality of life.

## 2. Does more growth lead to increased well-being and life satisfaction?<sup>3</sup>

The modern economic system has so far largely referred to gross domestic product (GDP) as an indicator of national well-being (Hamilton et al., 2006). It follows that the greater the year-on-year increase in the GDP of a country – or in other words the higher its financial growth – the greater the presumed national level of well-being. Nevertheless, this criterion has shown signs of ineffectiveness since its inception, and the global financial crisis – which has been unfolding since 2008 – has brought all the limits of market self-regulation to the fore (Stiglitz, 2010). However, degrowth also offers a more fundamental

<sup>2</sup> The field of Community and Critical Psychology is highly variegated. For a review of both approaches, along with their common ground and differences, we refer the reader to Kagan et al. (2011), as well as Fox et al. (2009).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, when referring to well-being, we intend “a positive state of affairs, brought about by the simultaneous and balanced satisfaction of diverse objective and subjective needs of individuals, relationships, organisations, and communities” (Prilleltensky, 2012, p. 2). Regarding life satisfaction and quality of life we draw on Ruut Veenhoven's seminal work on the ‘Four Qualities of Life’ (Veenhoven, 2013). The latter is, in fact, in line with the vision of happiness adopted by de-growth (Sekulova, 2015).

critique of a society dominated by economic rationality. As Demaria et al. (2013, p. 193) have pointed out “degrowth is not just an economic concept . . . it is a frame constituted by a large array of concerns, goals, strategies and actions”. In this paper, in accord with Abdallah and Thompson (2008), we assume degrowth to be also an antidote to the detrimental effect of increased consumption on well-being and life satisfaction.

In this regard, the literature has demonstrated that a high materialistic value orientation – that is, an array of values and life goals aimed at achieving financial success and higher status, gathering material possessions, and having an appropriate image – is likely to negatively affect both individual life domains (i.e. low self esteem, increased narcissism, and decreased happiness and well-being) and engagement in the social area (i.e. reduced involvement in community life, parenting and family, social relationships, and concern for the environment) (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Kasser, 2002; Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004).

The degrowth paradigm offers a possible solution to the negative effects of capitalistic and consumeristic culture. This lies in curbing the unbridled production and consumption of commodities – along with the values attached to them – and downshift towards what Latouche (2011) has named ‘*frugal abundance*’, that is, a relational and economic system freed from the myth of endless growth.

If this is our intention, we then must face the difficult task of applying the degrowth principle to real life and everyday situations. We acknowledge, in this sense, the need for instruments and good practices to better achieve this goal. Indeed, as Koch reminds us “*no-growth*” approaches have remained at fairly abstract levels to date, mostly failing to discuss concrete policy proposals, let alone their synergy potentials in a coherent transition strategy” (Koch, 2013, p. 13). With the exception of the recent special issue: ‘*De-growth: from theory to practice*’ in which new applications, methodologies, and policies were discussed (Sekulova, Kallis, Rodríguez-Labajos, & Schneider, 2013), the degrowth literature could benefit from more concrete examples of good practices that would bring to bear its novel theoretical proposals.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, as Burton (2015b) has pointed out, there are at least two major challenges that the degrowth paradigm must face in order to make the transition to ‘*an economy of the right size*’. First, it must answer the question of how the movement intends to deal with unemployment, poverty, social dislocation, and conflict, all of which are problems generated by the economic system it claims to oppose. The second, which directly follows, is to address the ways of achieving a degrowth society and economy through political means.

In this regard, CCP can offer degrowth scholarship a set of methodologies and good practices that have been specifically designed to promote critical consciousness, grassroots participation, sociability, and a just and equitable distribution of power and resources (Kagan et al., 2011; Kloos et al., 2012; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Prilleltensky, 2008). In regard to this issue, Francisco et al. (2001) have developed an internet-based support service known as ‘*Community Toolbox*’, which provides a detailed list of good practices. The online journals the *Global Journal of Community Psychology practice* and *Community Psychology in Global Perspective* are also committed to disseminating CCP vision, tools, practices and goals, all of which can be of great use to academics, scholars, and practitioners.

Based on these premises, in this article we propose to re-examine three fundamental principles of the degrowth agenda, namely decolonisation of the imaginary, reciprocity and conviviality, and environmental sustainability. These will be analysed in the light of the CCP ethos and practice and, in one specific case, of Liberation Psychology. More specifically, we will make a case for conscientisation, de-ideologisation, responsible togetherness, and care for the environment as well as social justice. We believe that these value-based domains will provide the degrowth movement with valuable instruments to further its aims and broaden its scope. In particular, we believe the de-growth discourse will be strengthened by these three aspects. The first is that it will inform de-growth practitioners and scholars on how to increase awareness of people’s dependence on the capitalistic and market-driven system. It will also equip them with instruments and visions to create more cooperative, collaborative, and cohesive societies. Lastly, it will help them to better deal with issues related to environmental justice as well as to build a more harmonious relationship with nature.

### 3. Decolonisation of the imaginary, de-ideologisation, and conscientisation

The degrowth paradigm holds that the current cultural homogeneity, which is a direct consequence of economic globalisation, has colonised the whole world both physically and psychologically. The quest for growth and capitalism has, in fact, been indoctrinating society, with a plethora of materialistic and consumerist values, beliefs, and needs, generated by a dominant social system that purports to be the best and only available option (Fisher & Ponniah, 2003; Latouche, 2009, 2010). As Welzer (2011, p. 23) has pointed out “*the principle of infinity* [which underpins the quest for endless growth] exists not only externally, but within one’s self”. As a consequence, we must be mindful that “*the idea of growth is therefore not only enshrined in business and politics, but also in the psychological structure of the people who grow up in such societies*” (p. 15). In line with this vision, Natale (2014, p. 60) holds that “*a novel worldview as well as an alternative lifestyle . . . call for reshaping the beliefs, motivations, and feelings that have hitherto underpinned our vision of the world*”.

In this light, CCP is able to offer theoretical and empirical tools, which will make this goal more attainable. For instance, the process of *decolonisation of the imaginary*, originally proposed by Habermas (1981/1984 and then championed by the

<sup>4</sup> Some interesting examples can already be found in Dietz and O’Neill’s (2013) work ‘Enough is Enough’, the programme for the Spanish economy released by Podemos (Navarro & Torres Lo’pez, 2014) and the Indignados movement in Barcelona, Spain (see Asara, 2015).

degrowth scholarship (Latouche, 2010) overlaps, in terms of both meaning and principle with that of ‘conscientisation’,<sup>5</sup> which is a concept largely advocated by Liberation Psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994; Vaughan, 2011), a companion approach to CCP (Montero & Sonn, 2009; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Liberation Psychology is, more specifically, part of a broad movement that began in Latin America in the 1960s, aimed at promoting social and economic justice for the poor, excluded, marginalised, and oppressed (Burton & Kagan, 2005; Quijano, 2000). Although it would be beyond the scope of this article to address all the facets of Liberation Psychology, we would particularly like to highlight here the power of conscientisation – and of de-ideologisation as a related tool – to operationalize the degrowth goal of ‘decolonising the imaginary’.

According to Liberation and CCP, this goal is to be reached by equipping the oppressed, illiterate, and disenfranchised with empowering instruments for the development of critical consciousness, whereby they can understand the reason for their subjugation to the dominant power. To this end, a relevant tool is Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is an approach to research that emphasises both participation and action by working ‘with’ people – not ‘on’ people – to promote social change (Bradbury, 2015). In fact, PAR invites us, as researchers, first to “*decolonize ourselves, that is, to discover the reactionary traits and ideas implanted in our minds and behaviours mostly by the learning process*” (Fals Borda, 2001, p. 29). If we are able to do that, we can then move on to promote decolonisation both for and with others.

CCP also makes use of several other PAR-oriented and liberationist principles such as reflexivity, critical thought, and awareness, all aimed at the promotion of individual and social well-being (Esposito & Freda, 2015; Minkler, 2000). Furthermore, this approach has redefined a number of instruments such as research think-tanks, focus groups, teaching laboratories, and bibliographical methods in line with conscientisation and de-ideologisation principles (Arcidiacono, Natale, & Carbone, 2012; Montero, 1994). These tools can be used, in many cases, to foster critical reasoning, thereby enabling people to make informed choices with regard to the production and consumption of goods. These degrowth-oriented practices have also proved effective in raising consciousness and self-responsibility, thereby allowing local groups and communities to demystify and de-colonise implicit mechanisms of ideology and take action towards social change (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2016; Montero, 1994).

Based on these premises, it is worth describing here an Italian example of applied conscientisation and decolonisation of the imaginary. The ‘La Res’ project is a civil economy-orientated enterprise, which repurpose assets confiscated from organised crime in cooperative production, to promote community liberation and well-being (Natale, Arcidiacono, & Di Martino, 2013). The alternative community system this project created started from a process of collective and symbolic redefinition of the territories under study, from which the ‘Gomorra Domain’ (Saviano, 2007/[Saviano, 2007]2006) was eventually renamed the ‘Don Pepe Diana Lands’.<sup>6</sup> This action of conscientisation is strongly intertwined with practices of decolonisation of the imaginary of an oppressed context.<sup>7</sup>

In this case, CCP played a determining role in analysing and monitoring social interactions, promoting social awareness of the criminal power ruling the area, and generating a potential alternative economic system to capitalism. It also supported social change by fostering enterprises based on solidarity, collaboration, and mutual trust (Natale et al., 2013).

#### 4. Reciprocity, conviviality, and responsible togetherness

An underlying cause for the current crisis is the extent to which the market-driven system erodes social fabric and the ties that keep people together, resulting in a diminished level of social capital as a consequence (Bartolini & Bonatti, 2008). With regard to that, the degrowth paradigm makes the case for an alternative social system, in which the yearning for material commodities is to be quenched by the presence of more relational goods (Kerschner, 2010; Trainer, 2012).

In this respect, some novel proposals for more communal and cooperative societies advocate a shift towards social networking cultures, which are social systems built on “*a paradigm centred less on self-interest and more on the ability to adopt common interests and belong to a group that shares objectives within a given network*” (Cardoso & Jacobetty, 2012, p. 197). In the same vein, Conill, Castells, Cardenas, and Servon (2012) have outlined the framework for a new economic system that places less emphasis on the growth imperative and focuses more on trust, altruism, and mutual exchange. In this context, we would like to focus in particular on two means of achieving this goal, namely reciprocity and conviviality (Latouche, 2010; Illich, 1973), given their beneficial effect on life satisfaction and well-being (Sekulova, 2015). Reciprocity is considered, in the light of the degrowth paradigm, as “*time devoted to society in the form of self-production, voluntary work or mutual exchange of goods and services*”. Conviviality, on the other hand, is understood as “*a system of social relationships based on community support, social unpaid work, reciprocity, voluntary work, favour and community exchange, household and informal care work*” (Andreoni & Galmarini, 2014, pp. 79–80).

When reciprocity and conviviality are seen through the lens of Community Psychology they acquire new meanings in terms of how people live together and interact within communities (Kloos et al., 2012; Procentese, Scotto Di Luzio, & Natale,

<sup>5</sup> Originally developed by Pinto (1960), critical consciousness or conscientisation, is the process of learning how to perceive and be aware of oppressive social, political, and economic contradictions (Freire, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Don Pepe Diana was a priest killed for standing against mafia power. Today he is considered a symbol of civil resistance.

<sup>7</sup> This involved combined strategies of intervention such as the inclusion of marginalised people in the social and economic fabric, the development of associations and social enterprises producing, distributing, and consuming at the local level, and the regeneration of a highly polluted area through harnessing solar and bio-fuel energy (La Res manifesto, available at <http://www.esperienzeconsud.it/res/scheda-del-progetto/>).



2011) as well as the bearing that this has on their well-being. One of the main objectives of Community Psychology is to shift from individualist to more collectivist societies (Orford, 2008) in order to increase relational empowerment, sense of community, inclusivity, self-determination, and self-efficacy, all of which have a fundamental effect on human quality of life (Boffi, Riva, & Rainisio, 2015). This goal is in line with the scientific literature, which has highlighted on several occasions the positive effect of social cohesion (Delhey & Dragolov, 2015), as well as social capital, as an additional solution to the current crisis (Helliwell, Huang, & Wang, 2014). A critical perspective adds to this at least three further aspects. The first pertains to the role of social responsibility, whereas the second concerns an understanding of how globalisation impacts on our ways of being with others. Lastly, CCP also considers the role that power plays in determining community life (Kagan et al., 2011).

Starting with the first point, CCP views reciprocity and conviviality as not only the result of sharing the same spaces and being in close proximity to others, but also as a means of taking on responsibility and providing useful resources for the whole community. This calls for what Procentese et al. (2011) have defined '*responsible togetherness*', which implies an active involvement of individuals and social groups in the life of the local community, in which members are expected to promote responsible actions as well as take part in a variety of social and community enterprises such as cultural, political, and sporting events. Overall, responsible togetherness depends on the collaboration, shared norms, and collective identity of individuals, groups, organisations, and institutions. Its objective is making social actors aware that they are capable of producing real change while assuming responsibility for themselves and others. In that regard, CCP is committed to fostering responsible togetherness through the promotion of social trust, a shared social agenda, community building, and social actions, all of which must be directed towards the care and maintenance of social contexts (Procentese, 2011).

Secondly, if our intention is to promote reciprocity and conviviality, we must also be mindful of the forces operating in an increasingly globalised planet, which constantly threaten the stability of social ties. Sloan (2010), for example, has highlighted the extent to which globalisation is undermining community life through increased social disaggregation. Thus, we must remember to link the global with the local, and invite international and national organisations, communities, and citizens to address the negative consequences of globalisation. Both degrowth and CCP agree on the necessity of using global responses to global challenges. As such, efficient interventions cannot be confined to localism (Burton, 2015a; Kagan et al., 2011; Romano, 2012).

One final important contribution of CCP is to inform our practices about the hidden risk of promoting sociability while at the same time overlooking the role and distribution of power in community life. While it is true, that reciprocity cannot be imposed by policies nor societies (Andreoni & Galmarini, 2013) there are several other communal principles that can be distorted in order to reinstate and preserve the power of those at the top of the social ladder. A good example of this, as reported by Kagan et al. (2011), is the concept of '*community as ghetto*', that is a state of affairs where the idea of community is hampered, with the intention of confining people within either physical or social barriers. In this case, even a flourishing community that is based on reciprocity and conviviality, yet is confined within boundaries by coercion, is likely to support a state of oppression and those who gain by it. In that regard, Perkins, Hughey, and Speer (2002, pp. 34–35) warn against the risk of focusing solely on social cohesion and social capital while overlooking other important aspects determining community life. In their words "*interpersonal bonding is useful as a catalyst for participation and commitment, but network bridging opportunities that increase power, access, and learning deserve greater emphasis*".

Examples of how CCP works to promote sociability include the Italian projects '*I love Porta Capuana*' and '*Urban Laboratories*'. The first of these brought together local people, associations, social enterprises, and local institutions to create grass-roots events and social opportunities. These were aimed at raising social awareness of problems, resources, and possible solutions in a deprived urban area central to the city of Naples (Arcidiacono, Grimaldi, Di Martino, & Procentese, 2016). The second promoted youth entrepreneurship through collaborative art-based laboratories, which were aimed at promoting social capital, solidarity, and social responsibility as an antidote to the economic and social crisis (Serino, Morciano, Scardigno, & Manuti, 2012). In addition to these examples, the seminal volume '*The Power of Collaborative Solutions*' by Wolff (2010) offers a large array of case studies and good practices on how to build community coalition from the perspective of CCP.

## 5. Human being and nature: promoting environmental justice

From a degrowth perspective, the current economic system is not only responsible for financial and social inequality, but also for environmental degradation as well as environmental injustice (Anguelovski, 2015). The term environmental justice is generally used to describe grassroots movements around the world, which are fighting against unequal allocation of environmental hazards and environmental racism (Martínez-Alier, 2002; Newton, 2009; Schlosberg, 2007).

In line with the CCP vision, Schlosberg (2007) has pointed out that "*theories of justice must expand to encompass groups: because groups and communities are demanding justice for groups and communities—not only for individuals*" (pp. 37–38). In fact, within the context of an increasingly globalised world, the communal quest for environmental justice also assumes global meaning. Indeed, "*globalisation has created new patterns of exposures and opportunities for environmental justice movement building*" (Mohai, Pellow, & Timmons Roberts, 2009, p. 425). This is the reason why, as Martínez-Alier (2012, p. 64) reminds us, we should combine the campaigns of EJOs (environmental justice organisations) in the global south "*against ecologically unequal exchange and the ecological debt*" and the social movements for sustainable economic degrowth of the rich Northern countries.

In this context, the capacity of CCP to achieve the objectives of degrowth lies first and foremost in promoting the intrinsic relatedness between human beings and the environment and then implementing the necessary changes. Furthermore, CCP bears the potential to act as a catalyst for pro-environmental behaviours by removing perceived barriers such as money, low efficacy, and hopelessness (Quimby & Angelique, 2011). In fact, as Riemer and Reich (2011) remind us, CCP can, among other things, “provide expertise in the practical application of ecological and system thinking (e.g., Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007; Kelly, Ryan, Altman, & Stelzner, 2000, p. 350)) and could become a major voice in finding solutions to the climate crisis that move beyond surface solutions”.

Examples of how CCP works in the context of sustainability and environmental justice can be found at the individual, community, and macro level. At the micro level, Dittmer and Riemer (2013) ran a series of workshops to educate young people in Ontario. The aim of these sessions was to address the issue of climate change by going beyond adjustments in individual behaviour and focusing on higher-level factors such as social norms, family rituals, and the influence of economics. These sessions also invited participants to reflect on how higher levels in society (i.e. the media) affect the individual level (e.g., a sense of social status).

At the community level, Culley and Angelique (2011) have shown the political stance of CCP in analysing how social power can foster public participation in the environmental disputes associated with global climate change. In this context, the authors assume a three-dimensional view of social power. This consists firstly of control over superior bargaining resources, which are used to influence others, and secondly of the ability to control participation in, and the nature of, debate over key issues. The third dimension is the ability to control and disseminate truths, myths, and ideologies which are used to shape thoughts, desires, and interests (Culley & Angelique, 2011, p. 412).

Lastly, with regard to the macro-level, Castro and Mouro (2011) have analysed the ‘European Natura 2000 Network of Protected Sites’ to shed light on the psycho-social processes involved in how individuals, groups, and communities respond to multilevel governance of environmental protection.

Turning to a more analytical and theoretical level, Harré (2011), in her book ‘Psychology for a Better World’, reports that a higher identification with their local community leads people to assume more environmentally sustainable practices (Van Vugt, 2002). This is in line with degrowth’s aim of emphasising social relations in order for people to better deal with the downscaling of consumption, which in turn is a prerequisite for a more environmentally sustainable social system (Matthey, 2010).

Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010), offer a final contribution towards environmental preservation from the perspective of CCP. The authors remind us that there are at least four points on which CCP can contribute in this regard. The first, the concern for individual, relational, and collective well-being, has been considered above. The second, the fight for social justice, and the third, addressing issues of power and oppression, will be discussed in the next paragraph. Here we would first like to focus our attention on the fourth point, the prevention of conflict and use of violence, which relates to the often-overlooked negative impact of environmental injustice on social fabric. Given that one of the main concerns of the environmental justice movement is to ensure that the burden of natural depletion is fairly distributed among all people, regardless of class, race, and ethnicity, (Schlosberg, 2007; Shrader-Frechette, 2002), conditions of blatant environmental inequity may lead to increased social conflict over land, water, and other resources (Moss, 2009, p. 177).

This appears to be strongly evident in the recent wave of migrants and asylum seekers to Europe from the Middle East and Africa, which is in many respects a consequence of the economic and environmental exploitation of the global south (Martínez-Alier, 2012). As shown in this paragraph, CCP and degrowth are well positioned to tackle this issue, and many others related to environmental matters, by redefining the relationship between humans and nature as well as promoting conditions of environmental justice worldwide.

## 6. Social justice as the ground for promoting degrowth and well-being

The themes outlined above highlight some epistemic and value-based aspects that, albeit extremely relevant, could still not be sufficient to promote well-being in a context of degrowth. If we really wish to fully advance individual and community quality of life we need to prioritise the promotion of social justice, as well as equality of access to resources and opportunities.

There is wide evidence in support of viewing social justice as a core value for both degrowth – especially with regard to inter-generational, environmental, and distributive justice (Muraca, 2012) – and CCP—particularly for inclusivity, cultural, and procedural justice (Prilleltensky, 2012). Nonetheless, we must be conscious that the bearing that this has on life satisfaction and well-being may vary according to different social climates. From a liberationist perspective, this means that what many might consider a right is, in fact, very often a privilege and vice versa (Montero, 1994).

On these grounds, the degrowth paradigm invites us to call into question the very idea of social justice, and what it truly means to promote related concepts such as freedom, health, happiness and well-being. To this end, degrowth advocates an epistemic transformation of the concept of ‘good life’ from ‘well-having’ to ‘well-being’ (Matthey, 2010) and eventually becoming ‘well-living’ (see the Quechuan ideal of ‘sumak kausai’).

In this regard, the degrowth framework can benefit from the seminal work ‘Wellness as Fairness’ by Isaac Prilleltensky (2012) whereby the author makes explicit, at least at a theoretical level, the effect that the promotion of social justice has on people’s life satisfaction and well-being. According to Prilleltensky, this linkage runs along a continuum that goes from

persistent conditions of injustice – which generate oppression, internalisation, helplessness, upward comparison and suffering – to optimal conditions of justice—which conversely generate responsive conditions, prevention, individual pursuit, and avoidance of comparisons and hence a thriving context.

Based on this premise, [Ledwith \(2012\)](#) recommends considering at least three aspects when setting out to promote social justice, environmental justice, and collective well-being from a CCP perspective. Firstly, we must remember that we need an understanding of ‘power’ and its role in shaping an individual’s psyche and behaviours. Framing human well-being in terms of how it is affected by a power differential, rather than the more abstract promotion of human rights, requires considering where power resides, as well as dealing with power imbalances. In other words, this means identifying which groups or individuals hold more power than others ([Partridge, 2008](#); [Prilleltensky, 2008](#)). In this light, interventions aimed at promoting well-being and life satisfaction from a CCP perspective need to be assessed, among other criteria, on the basis of their psycho-political validity ([Prilleltensky, 2003](#)), which pertains to “*the role of power in wellness, oppression, and liberation at the personal, relational, and collective domains*” ([Prilleltensky, 2008, p. 129](#)). This invites us to delve into the mechanisms through which power is exerted to generate oppression. Is power used to control resources, create barriers to participation, set agendas, shape conceptions through the creation of ideologies that perpetuate the status quo, or a combination of all these ([Culley & Hughey, 2008](#))? In this regard, as [Prilleltensky \(2008, p. 116\)](#) argues “*power is never political or psychological; it is always both*”.

Secondly, our critical approach to social justice should always be grounded in a dynamic and dialectical alternation between theory and practice. Again, the integration of Critical and Community psychology offers a good solution to this task in that, as mentioned above, the former is highly action-oriented whereas the latter places a great deal of emphasis on challenging the status quo ([Davidson et al., 2006](#)).

As a third point, practice, also understood as ‘taking action’, cannot only be a matter of individual interest. Viewed from a broader perspective, the purpose of liberation must be, in Montero’s words, “*collectively and individually built, obtained, and won*” ([Montero, 1994, p. 76](#)). Collectivism also applies to assuring environmental justice for everyone, an aim that is endorsed by increasing demand for public participation in environmental decision-making ([Spyke, 1999](#)).

As we have shown in this paragraph, social justice plays a fundamental role in determining how to address the crisis and its consequences. CCP assumes that the degrowth movement can overcome the current crisis, provided that it incorporates a social justice compass into its vision thereby assuring that the construction of a less materialistic world will also entail a fairer distribution of available resources and opportunities. In this sense, we are mindful of [Caraça’s \(2012, p. 58\)](#) warning about the often quoted Chinese saying ‘crisis also means opportunity’, which is today becoming “*crisis for most and opportunity for a few*”.

## 7. Final remarks

This article has presented some good practices and visions for attaining novel social and individual goals for the future of humankind. These will support scholars, practitioners, and social activists in paving the way for building fairer, more sustainable, collaborative, and responsible societies free from the myth of endless growth ([Morin, 2011](#)).

Our argument rests on the assumption that decolonisation of the imaginary, reciprocity and conviviality, and the relationship with nature are three tenets of the degrowth rationale. In relation to this, scholars from a variety of disciplines are facing the challenge of operationalising degrowth principles in order to unlock all of their transformative and revolutionary potential ([Haberl, Marina, Krausmann, Martínez-Alier, & Winiwarter, 2011](#)).

This work, therefore, has set out to integrate the vision of degrowth with the ethos and approach of CCP. In particular, we have shown how this approach fosters social interaction, thereby raising awareness and generating support for social change and social enterprises based on solidarity, collaboration, mutual trust, and respect for the environment.

In doing so, we have offered examples of how citizens can be empowered and made aware of the practices used by the dominant system to enforce its power (conscientisation and de-ideologisation). We have also shown examples of practices that place value on sharing and being responsible for each other in community life (togetherness), and maintain a harmonious relationship with nature and the earth (environmental justice).

In addition to this, we have framed these principles with reference to the promotion of social justice. This requires addressing the issue of what it means to assure conditions of social justice in a globalised society that considers fairness and equal opportunity in terms of having more rather than less ([van Griethuysen, 2010](#)).

In conclusion, this work has attempted to shed light on the interrelatedness of degrowth and CCP. Our ultimate goal is to raise awareness of the challenges of our era in a way that is in keeping with what degrowth thinkers and Critical Community psychologists advocate. In particular, this paper has stressed the importance of finding alternatives to the current economic system, which is strongly shaped by imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and globalisation. Moreover, it has highlighted the need for novel models of interaction among individuals at the local and social levels. Lastly, it has offered an additional space in which to rethink the relationship between human beings and nature.

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