

Go hard, go early: Alternatives to the treatment model for addressing poverty, inequality and mental distress in Aotearoa New Zealand

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This discussion article is based on a paper presented at the Community Psychology Symposium as part of the 2021 New Zealand Psychology Conference. In this article, I reflect on my teaching praxis, widening inequalities, and on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for psychology. Currently, the lack of mental health sector capacity and the shortage of some 1000 psychologists, poses a significant conundrum. This article revisits Albee's critique, "that no mass disease or disorder has ever been controlled or eliminated through individual treatment" (2005, p.37), and in so doing I reflect on what community psychology can contribute at this point in history.

Aotearoa New Zealand has, more than other jurisdictions, largely

I argue that the current government's COVID-19 elimination strategy and the collective responses not only help us to 'flatten the curve' of COVID-19, but also hold potential to 'flatten the contagion of neoliberal ideology.' In Aotearoa New Zealand, COVID-19 has disrupted our lives, but also decades of rhetoric that 'there-is-no-alternative' to the laissez-faire market approach. Recent events have shown that, in a crisis, it is possible to act to prevent threats to public health, and to invest in people and communities.

An unexpected benefit from the COVID-19 crisis may be that it offers a stark reminder that humans can achieve a lot by working together. Sometimes, giving up personal freedoms and individual interests is necessary to benefit the

experience. For instance, Harari (2015) states that human beings are unique in being the only species that can cooperate with large numbers of strangers, and we often do so with no immediate benefit to the self. These prosocial qualities underpin the development of human societies and are the key to our survival in the turbulent 21st century.

By no means do I seek to generalise about, or romanticise, human nature, the COVID-19 situation and political responses. I am simply presenting the idea, that at this moment in history, the neoliberal 'there-is-no-alternative' mantra has briefly loosened its iron-clad grip. Many things we thought of as being normal in 2019 have been upended. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that there is nothing inevitable about the societies we live in. This disruption to our routines and taken-for-granted lives, is distressing and some people are more affected than others. Nonetheless, for those of us not in a desperate survival state, disruption can open up our thinking to new ideas. As Bregman (2014, 2019) argues, many of the values we hold dear today, such as civil rights and abolishing slavery, were initially considered too unrealistic and radical but became more accepted following struggle and perseverance. Hence, the current COVID-19 crisis offers both an opportunity and a responsibility to circulate progressive and utopian ideas.

In the discipline of psychology, much of what we encounter is distressing. Hence, it is important to retain a sense of agency and hope, rather than despair and helplessness.

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contained the spread and human health impacts of COVID-19. However, the pandemic has also created a myriad of practical and psychological challenges that have pushed vulnerable people even further into hardship. In particular, economic settings preceding and during the COVID-19 crisis have inflamed the New Zealand housing crisis, exposing the flaws of neoliberal market policies and entrenching severe housing inequities for generations to come (White, 2021). In this commentary,

public good. This is significant, as it counters dominant views of humans as self-centred utility maximisers. In mainstream 'WEIRD' psychology, studies such as the bystander effect and the Milgram and Zimbardo experiments have been held up as evidence that humans supposedly only have a thin veneer of civilised conduct, covering selfish and nasty impulses (de Waal, 2009; Teo, 2019). Nonetheless, scholars across a range of disciplines are presenting compelling evidence to counter the narcissistic view of the human

Many students arrive with an ethic of wanting to help others, even though they are often themselves members of the precariat and thus face multiple issues on top of their studies. Despite such challenges, current students appear to be more questioning of the status quo, and they are less trapped by binaries and more aware of complexities. Consequently, my teaching cannot sugar-coat the hard issues and it cannot remain abstract or detached from wider societal concerns. Aside from COVID-19, there are a plethora of crises surrounding us and on the horizon. This means psychology needs to adopt new operating systems to remain relevant and responsive. We need to provide hope for humanity given that there is a lot for people to process and worry about.

Both in Aotearoa and internationally, there is growing concern about the increased mental distress arising from COVID-19 and lockdowns. Taylor and colleagues (2020) have identified the rise of 'COVID stress syndrome', and there are warnings about a potential tsunami of mental health problems due to the increased presentation of anxiety and loneliness (Inkster, 2021). Shelvin and colleagues (2021) argue that these claims may be overdrawn given that there is greater heterogeneity in the psychological impacts of the pandemic. Indeed, COVID-19 has been extremely disruptive and there are significant stressors. That said, there are risks in assuming that the pandemic is the main driver of widespread mental health distress (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Firstly, people do have resilience, and crises can help to see this in others and ourselves. Secondly, there is a polarisation of lockdown experiences, between those that are safe, secure and peaceful, and those that are not. Accordingly, therapeutic approaches may be of limited value for those most harshly impacted by COVID-19. This point is not a critique of the professional conduct or usefulness of therapists. Supporting people with their psychological wellbeing is essential. I am simply highlighting that the fundamental problem is not necessarily COVID-19, but the fact that too many New Zealanders already had stressful and precarious lives before the pandemic.

Most of us working in psychology lead relatively secure lives. In contrast, people living in insecure rentals or 'week-to-week' have less capacity to be able to garden, stock-up, or to afford the added electricity and food costs of everyone being at home. Such stark differences between households require us to be careful to avoid

the tendency to pathologise people's distress. Being sad or anxious is an entirely normal response to challenging situations, and not necessarily a symptom of mental illness (Cosgrove & Herrawi, 2021). Expecting people to minimise their distress when they are dealing with so many issues beyond their control is problematic; why would we expect such people not to feel something?

Through our praxis, we can advance operating systems for psychology that foster manaakitanga and build on our fundamental human nature as engaged pro-social beings. If we look across history, all of the major progressive advances have come about through crises and struggle. This is a good time to try out new ideas, even radical ones.

Most certainly, some people require specialised mental health support, and thus providing appropriate services is a priority. A significant challenge is that COVID-19 has highlighted the cracks that were already there following years of underfunding and fragmentation resulting from the competitive contracting model. Yet, even when mental health services are well-resourced there is still the risk of the 'inverse care law' (Hart, 1971); since services are mostly utilised by affluent people, while the poorest and sickest present late if at all. This is not because poorer people do not care about their health, but instead, it reflects access issues, discrimination and racism, and the daily toil of surviving in poverty.

More effort is required to look 'upstream' at the underlying structural causes of people's mental distress, especially in the context of increasingly unequal, precarious and harmful societies. Going upstream may be harder to do (initially), but it is more sustainable and justifiable from social, ethical and economic standpoints (Reimer et al., 2020; Stuckler & Basu, 2013). In the UK, looking upstream to consider people's social, political and material contexts is advocated by Psychologists for Social Change (<http://www.psychchange.org/>). This online network raises awareness about the psychological damage resulting from neoliberal policies, and how these have intensified austerity, punitive welfare, precarious employment, housing financialisation, debt, health inequalities, and extreme wealth disparities.

It may appear somewhat heretical to be questioning the emphasis on psychological treatments for the mental health fall-out from pandemics and other crises. I am not alone in these heretical thoughts. The sociologist, Rimke (2016) uses the term psychocentrism to critique

the dominant belief that people's problems arise from individual pathologies and characteristics. She argues that, "Psychocentrism is itself a form of social injustice, where individual reformation rather than social and economic justice is promoted" (ibid, p.5). Similarly, psychology scholars (Adams et al., 2019; Cosgrove & Herrawi, 2021; Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017; Teo, 2019) have commented on the tendency of our discipline to overlook the societal origins of people's distress, and to be largely preoccupied with individual-level deficits or coping. Given that psychology is a discipline that seeks to help people, it is important to avoid perpetuating social injustices or to come across as being out-of-touch with the realities of people's everyday struggles. To this end, a key strategy I employ as a tertiary educator is to reframe so-called 'private troubles' by connecting these to larger system processes. This strategy allows students to explore alternatives to the overly individualistic, victim-blaming, and brutally competitive rhetoric of neoliberalism. The COVID-19 crisis has to some extent created space to push back against the hyper-individualised, psychocentric, and apolitical norms, which dominate in society today. Through our praxis, we can advance operating systems for psychology that foster manaakitanga and build on our fundamental human nature as engaged pro-social beings. If we look across history, all of the major progressive advances have come about through crises and struggle. This is a good time to try out new ideas, even radical ones.

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