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## Counselling Psychology and Under-Represented Groups: A Vision for Advocacy as Mutual Transformation La psychologie du counseling et les groupes sous- représentés : concevoir la promotion et la défense des droits comme une transformation mutuelle

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### ABSTRACT

The discipline of counselling psychology in Canada has aligned consistently with social justice principles. Consistent with this, a working group at the 2018 Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference was assigned to consider the role of Canadian counselling psychology in advocating for the needs of members of under-represented groups. This brief report captures insights from the working group and focuses on two primary themes: a critical reformulation of advocacy as mutual transformation for personal and social change and a need to engage with change processes at multiple levels. The group conceptualized effective advocacy as recentring historically marginalized perspectives while decentring “expert” roles and traditionally dominant perspectives.

### RÉSUMÉ

La discipline de la psychologie du counseling au Canada s’est constamment harmonisée avec les principes de justice sociale. C’est dans cet ordre d’idées qu’un groupe de travail du Congrès canadien 2018 de la psychologie du counseling fut chargé de considérer le rôle de la psychologie du counseling au Canada à l’égard des besoins des groupes sous-représentés. Ce bref compte rendu présente les résultats du groupe de travail et met l’accent sur deux thématiques principales : la reformulation cruciale de la notion de « promotion et défense des droits » en tant que transformation mutuelle favorisant le changement sur le plan personnel et social et la nécessité d’entamer des démarches de changement à divers niveaux. Le groupe a conceptualisé la promotion et la défense effectives comme étant le fait de réhabiliter des perspectives historiquement marginalisées, tout en relativisant les rôles d’« experts » et les points de vue traditionnellement dominants.

Canadian counselling psychology has aligned consistently with social justice principles, including embracing a vision for advocacy for members of under-represented groups (Canadian Psychological Association, 2009). A working group

of the 2018 Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference was assigned to “The Role of Canadian Counselling Psychology in Advocating for the Needs of Under-Represented Groups.” The group, made up of 18 people (a mix of counselling psychology practitioners, students, and academics), was tasked to consider the needs and experiences of people within under-represented groups with the aim of advocating for greater social justice responsiveness within the discipline in the upcoming decade and beyond.

Over the course of two sessions of 1.5 hours each, members of the working group shared experiences and perspectives aimed at exploring ways to work toward greater responsiveness within the discipline, to advocate outside of the discipline, and to take action in our broader community contexts. This brief report captures insights from this working group discussion, articulating an emerging vision of advocacy as personal transformation and systemic change as well as practical ways in which members of the discipline of counselling psychology can embrace the task of advocacy. This report is not intended to present an authoritative or comprehensive perspective of the stance that the discipline ought to embrace toward advocacy. It is intended instead to summarize the insights that were articulated in the conversation between members of this particular working group.

These insights and strategies are anchored in two primary themes, including a critical reformulation of advocacy as mutual transformation for personal and social change and a need to engage with change processes at multiple levels. The overarching aim and result of effective advocacy was conceptualized as recentring historically marginalized perspectives while decentring perspectives that have traditionally held power.

### **A Critical Reformulation of Advocacy as Mutual Transformation**

A primary outcome of the working group emerged as a critical reformulation of the working group task itself, suggesting that advocacy occurs most effectively and authentically in relationship with others rather than for or simply on behalf of others. The working group members emphasized the two personal activities of *joining* and *witnessing* (Reynolds, 2002) as the processes that motivate shifts in sharing voice and power. The notion that advocacy is taken up by one party on behalf of the other misses the importance of participatory involvement in change. Moreover, it misses the point that authentic advocacy emerges out of mutual transformation from encounters with the “other.”

Members of the working group highlighted the intersectionalities of context and locations of power. They questioned the ways in which groups are defined and suggested that there is an inherent “othering” that comes from placing people in discrete groups or categorizing a group’s needs. Participants of the working group agreed that the construct of under-represented groups is meaningful but limited. The common theme of under-representation is a contextual loss of power, and

individuals within under-represented groups may also belong to groups holding more power in other aspects of identity. The same person may identify with marginalization in one area (e.g., belonging to a minority ethnic group or having a different ability) and may experience the benefits of privilege in another identity such as gender or sexual orientation. Being able to locate oneself in one's own intersectional identities is an important starting point to join efforts of advocacy for self and other.

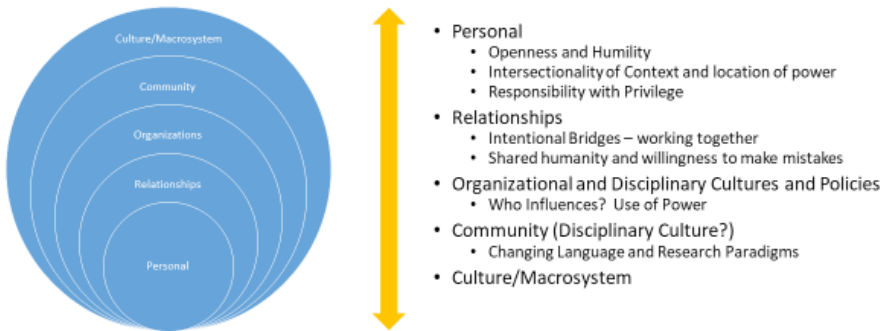
Consistent with the perspective of mutuality in advocacy, the parallel and related processes of personal change and social change are emphasized as being essential for meaningful and sustained advocacy efforts. The working group referred to this as the indispensable “both/and” reality of advocacy whereby personal change and social change inspire and influence each other reciprocally. Social change is emphasized as an ethical imperative in a discipline committed to social justice. However, this ethical imperative risks being merely an instrumental redistribution of power or, even worse, a “cause without care” if it is not personally integrated by members of the discipline (see Sim, 2010, for a discussion about virtue ethics and social justice). Conversely, simply focusing sentimentally on common humanity and personal care for individual “others” without addressing issues of power and privilege is a naive dismissal of the systems and structures that perpetuate oppression. Change in both domains is essential (see Treichler et al., 2020 for insights on diversity and social justice training in professional psychology coursework and supervision). The members of the working group proclaimed a dual mandate to be changed *and* to change the world. The potential of being changed comes from personal openness, encounter, and genuine “I-thou” relationships with the “other” (Buber, 1937). As changed people in our discipline, we change the world by recognizing how to use, share, and yield power benevolently.

### **Multiple Levels of Change**

Within an ecological systems framework (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these processes can be conceptualized as being both bottom up and top down with efforts toward both levels being engaged concurrently (see Figure 1).

Top-down approaches appeal to power and responsibility, whereas bottom-up approaches represent grassroots processes of change. All experiences are located within a particular social and cultural context. The members of the working group endorsed the view that authentic social responsibility and action toward social change ought to emerge not just out of ideology but also out of personal transformation. When we as professionals in the discipline of counselling psychology allow ourselves to be touched personally and interconnected with the “other,” we cannot walk away without being changed in some way. This in turn influences how we choose to use our unique power and influence. Members of the working group noted that relationships and personal encounters with the “other”

Figure 1  
*Advocacy as Multiple Levels of Change*



catalyze a personal commitment to the needs and priorities of the historically under-represented. Change processes at the personal level start with openness and humility and with a willingness to identify locations of power and privilege and to take responsibility for these.

At the relational level, the view of advocacy as mutual transformation is again highlighted in the stance of *working with* (joining) the other and yielding voice and power. Relational advocacy involves building intentional bridges that create spaces for encounter and understanding. Relational change processes acknowledge our shared humanity and even our shared human frailty. In our commitment to benevolent relationships with individuals of under-represented groups in a journey toward responsible advocacy, we must be willing to make mistakes. This is where the personal stance of humility and openness facilitates engagement at the relational level, with the courage to show up with blind spots and misunderstandings and to be ready for these to be changed and to be challenged in relationship. The concept of voice was offered as a metaphor for letting people speak for themselves and be listened to. This stance of relational advocacy aligns solidly with values of counselling psychology and specifically the definition of counselling psychology adopted by the Canadian Psychological Association (Bedi et al., 2011; Canadian Psychological Association, 2009).

In organizational culture and policy, change requires questioning who holds power and influence. Who is shaping organizational culture, policy, and procedure? *Power-with-others* is differentiated from hierarchical *power-over* (Covington, 2008). Within the discipline of counselling psychology (community and disciplinary level), advocacy calls for questioning and adapting whose language we are speaking and whose tools we are using for both research and clinical practice. Accountability to under-represented communities requires that we consider practice-based evidence (Elliott & Zucconi, 2006) over evidence-based practice.

Sharing voice<sup>1</sup> with members of under-represented communities requires a long-term commitment to engaging with, listening to, and learning from each other and to adopting participatory research methods (such as participatory action research; see Kidd and Kral, 2005), voice-centred research (such as the Listening Guide; see Gilligan et al., 2003), and prevention and intervention activities that fit traditional cultural notions of wellness and healing (Moodley et al., 2008). Finally, the widest level of the macrosystem both holds and is impacted by change processes at each of the other levels.

### **Summary Theme: Advocacy as Recentring Historically Marginalized Perspectives**

With both an emphasis on common humanity and a recognition of the roles of power and privilege, authentic advocacy embraces a willingness to decentre the so-called experts (researchers or practitioners) and the assumptions of our theories and research paradigms in order to recentre the perspectives of individuals and groups who historically have had less voice and power (see Figure 2).

Existing theoretical frameworks and research models are decentred in favour of listening to and understanding the human person and their experiences as presented from historically under-represented groups and individuals. Research questions and priorities need to emerge from under-represented communities themselves. Cultural or community understandings of wellness and goals for healing should be the guide for professional prevention and intervention activities. This brief report is clearly not intended to resolve the question of how counselling psychology can advocate for the needs of under-represented groups effectively or efficaciously. The process of the working group at the 2018 Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference did just the opposite of that, which was to problematize the task of advocacy and the assumptions about power in advocacy.

This working group determined that advocacy is not for individuals to take on, but rather it is the responsibility of individuals to engage fully as listening partners with members of under-represented communities. The inherent pain and messiness of addressing these processes was given voice throughout the working group whose members represented a microcosm of intersecting forms of identity, power, privilege, and status. Pursuing lifelong journeys of growth toward authentic advocacy requires both humility and courage. This must be modelled by counselling psychology educators and supervisors and actively cultivated in

1 As noted in the previous section, it is important to note that *voice* is a concept referencing identity and relationship, of speaking and of being heard. Here, the reference to *sharing* voice rather than to *giving* voice is intentional. Advocacy involves yielding power in relationship with members of under-represented groups around values, priorities, and perspectives. In a conversation about power and voice, it is important not to perpetuate the idea that those in more power are unilateral brokers of voice, with tokenism entrenching power and privilege further.

Figure 2

*Advocacy as Recentring*

training programs and disciplinary activities such as conferences. As a field, we have much work to do. As people within the field, we have much work to do. The work of genuine advocacy based in personal change requires a stance of listening and an openness to change.

Even within the brief experiential microcosm of the working group, we experienced misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and mutual silencing. We also participated in the empowering potential of giving voice to the immediacy of our experiences with each other and of offering a stance of openness and desire to understand each other. Ultimately, the 18 members of this working group affirmed the importance of persevering in the uncomfortable and life-affirming journey of learning and growing through our encounters with the “other” in our personal and professional activities. This journey is aimed at sharing power in ways that address meaningfully the needs of people within historically under-represented groups.

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