My work in critical psychology over the past three decades reflects shifting theoretical concerns, political projects, and personal experiences, motivated chiefly by an interest in radical social change and a sense that psychology as a discipline helps shape and sustain an unjust and unsatisfying status quo (Fox 2012; Fox et al. 2009). This seemed to me obvious ever since my immersion in 1970s anarchist politics, when I came to understand anarchism as a psychopolitical movement seeking to foster both autonomy and mutuality without sacrificing one for the other (Fox 1985, 2014). This balancing act is complicated by psychology’s reduction of systemic strains to a collection of individual problems and, certainly in its mainstream United States version, its enshrinement of individualism as the primary value. My orientation within critical psychology, thus, as within the Radical Psychology Network that I co-founded in 1993 (http://radpsynet.org), has been to challenge mainstream assumptions about the interplay between human nature and the larger society and to address psychology’s role as a pacifying agent.

Several impressions have stuck with me since the 1970s. First, anarchist political thinking has always stressed working towards both systemic change and personal change at the same time. Second, despite this theoretical awareness, anarchists as individuals, wary of psy-science’s societal role and the dangers of psychologizing political issues, often avoid deep self-exploration. And third, many anarchists, like activists more generally—and like many academics—fumble through tensions they might navigate more easily if they had greater personal and interpersonal knowledge and skills.
Elsewhere I have explored these issues in relation to psychology’s various guises: academic discipline, therapeutic profession, psychoanalytic understanding, and force of popular culture (Fox 2011). Critical psychologists, like anarchists, know that focusing on the personal, on therapy and “understanding ourselves” better, on “personal growth,” can be just one more trap that distracts us from political action. Ironically, this suspicion of psychology coincides with awareness that much of the anarchist project is inherently social-psychological. Emma Goldman wrote more than a century ago that “the problem that confronts us today, and which the nearest future is to solve, is how to be one’s self and yet in oneness with others, to deeply feel with all human beings and still retain one’s characteristic qualities” (cited in Shukaitis 2008, 12). Early anarchists insisted that “changes in personal aspects of life, such as families, children, sex should be viewed as political activity” (Leeder 1996, 143). A century later, “Salmon” (2010, 13) notes “It is easy to talk about challenging the system and forget about challenging ourselves at the same time. It is not about putting one above the other, but realizing that both have to go hand in hand to be truly revolutionary.”

Over the past six years I have explored groups that focus on the kinds of self-knowledge and skills that radical activists and critical psychologists often dismiss. From the beginning, I hoped to gain more insight and learn new skills without disappearing into self-absorption and passivity. I wanted to begin answering for myself, in a personal and practical way, questions that Abraham Maslow asked in his 1967 course on Utopian Social Psychology: “How good a society does human nature permit? How good a human nature does society permit? What is possible and feasible? What is not?” (1971, 212). These questions are addressed more or less explicitly in a wide range of non-academic settings—intentional communities, alternative schools, political mobilizations. What I chose to do was explore them along the fringes of the human potential movement. What drew me in was this dilemma: if we understood our needs and wants better and knew how to interact more effectively, we might be better off both individually and collectively. But, aware of the dangers of self-absorption, we resist putting energy into rethinking ourselves. So what’s an activist to do?
Communication, Connection, Community

Reassuringly, some forms of humanistic and even New Age thought aim for, and claim compatibility with, significant social change (McLaughlin and Davidson 2010; Rosenberg 2004; Satin 1979). At the same time, it is worth acknowledging up front that many participants in this alternative culture insist that the only way to change the world is to work (only) on changing ourselves. Therapy and self-help books and workshops continue to emphasize individual solutions to problems caused by social distortions (Justman 2005), whether within psychotherapy's core or in humanistic approaches growing out of Western psychology, Eastern philosophy, and New Age mysticism. This is the case even though many of the alternative world's answers to Maslow's questions can be traced to politically conscious radical psychology and psychoanalysis. Wilhelm Reich's (1942) exploration of the connection between sexual repression and fascism remains central even if unacknowledged, as do later variants of Marxist, feminist, and other traditions. Reich himself built on the work of the anarchist psychoanalyst Otto Gross, who broke away from Freud to raise “questions about the freedom of the individual in relationship to social norms and traditions.”¹ Gross believed that “[w]hoever wants to change the structures of power . . . in a repressive society, has to start by changing these structures in himself” (Sombart 1991, cited in Heuer n.d.). Similarly, the anarchist psychiatrist Roberto Freire's 1970s somatherapy, a body-focused group performance therapy building on Reich, tries “to understand the socio-political behavior of individuals starting from what happens in their daily lives.”² Paul Goodman, another anarchist psychologist, emphasized societal context in his contribution to gestalt therapy (Perls et al. 1951).

Despite these antecedents, the groups and approaches I have explored de-emphasize or ignore political analysis and action in favor of personal growth and interpersonal dynamics primarily related to communication and connection. Not defining themselves as political, they attract people from a range of political and apolitical identities, and yet their purposes and methods are arguably consistent with many critical and radical values. Aiming to shake us out of complacency toward new habits, goals, motivations, and emotions, they

parallel to varying degrees political calls to rethink things we have taken for
granted about human nature and hierarchy, capitalism and materialism, mo-
nergamy and sexuality; they emphasize working with others to alter lifelong
habits, emotions, fears, and hopes. The goal, for many, is not just to focus
inward but to create ongoing networks and communities. Some hope to spark
even broader societal change.

These explorations have challenged my own assumptions and habits and
tested my ability to be patient with new language, styles, and ways of looking at
myself and the world. Three groups in particular have drawn me in despite my
hesitations: Nonviolent Communication, the Human Awareness Institute, and
Network for a New Culture. Each teaches skills useful for challenging assump-
tions and practices related to mainstream values, practices, and goals. Despite
differences in emphasis and scope, all three have in common an understanding
of human behavior rooted in humanistic or radical psychology and an aware-
ness that changing the way people think, feel, and live means learning how to
enhance communication, connection, and community. Elements of humanistic
psychology, cognitive and gestalt therapy, and Reichian analysis are evident in
the general emphasis on belief and emotion, body and mind, and self and culture.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

Marshall Rosenberg (2003) trained as a clinical psychologist under Carl Rogers
but soon decided that diagnosis is irrelevant to helping people meet their needs.
Growing out of his work with civil rights activists in the 1960s, he developed
a method of communication designed to avoid heated instant responses. Non-
vioent Communication (sometimes called Compassionate Communication),
the most mainstream of the three approaches described here as well as the most
targeted in scope, is taught today in workshops around the world. According
to the website of the Center for Nonviolent Communication: “NVC begins by
assuming that we are all compassionate by nature and that violent strategies—
whether verbal or physical—are learned behaviors taught and supported by the
prevailing culture. NVC also assumes that we all share the same, basic human
needs, and that each of our actions are a strategy to meet one or more of these
needs.”\(^3\) Given NVC’s assumption that all feelings stem from universal indi-

\(^3\) See the website of the Center for Nonviolent Communication at http://cnvc.org.
Individual needs, the challenge in communication, especially difficult communication, is to learn how to seek mutually beneficial strategies to meet both side’s needs. This is possible only with some learned awareness that feelings such as anger, frustration, or annoyance might be linked to unmet needs, for example for respect, belonging, intimacy, or equality. Similarly, feeling loving, warm, thankful, or trusting comes from meeting these or other needs. Inherent in this framework is that communication flows more productively when it focuses on potential strategies to meet needs rather than on emotion-based demands. It means that “getting in touch with your feelings” requires not just recognizing and expressing them but also understanding what needs they stem from and then considering various ways to meet them. For Rosenberg, the skills to act on this awareness are crucial to moving not just towards personal growth but towards social change (Rosenberg 2004).

Over the past few years I have taken two daylong and several shorter NVC training workshops, and have been in close contact with many NVC trainers and adherents. I have seen NVC’s specific methodology and terminology used with dramatic effect, and I have found it helpful in some of my own difficult interactions. I have also seen it used clumsily and mechanically, sometimes by people new to the practice who rarely stray from the training routine and rote jargon. My sense is that NVC is useful especially in interpersonal relationships where both parties want to maintain the relationship—but in contrast to mediation, which in practice often simply splits the difference between two conflicting perspectives, NVC seeks win-win outcomes that meet the needs of both sides. And often it succeeds.

Rosenberg and others report using the technique in a wide range of larger conflicts, from urban gangs to Northern Ireland to Israel-Palestine. Rosenberg’s accounts are anecdotal and impressionistic but often impressive. Although NVC seems to me less adaptable to settings where the parties are unwilling to engage in mutual humanization, an increasing number of NVC practitioners do attempt to bring the practice into political conflict zones and to teach NVC with a specific focus on power relationships, race and ethnicity, and histories of long-term hostility (e.g., Miki Kashtan’s workshops on Leveraging Your Influence). A group of NVC trainers organizes workshops called The Nonviolent Leadership for Social Justice Retreat, which focus on using NVC for issues related to race, ethnicity, and social class. In my own experience as a faculty union member, an approach similar to NVC used in campus contract negotiations led to a much better outcome than had been the case during earlier traditional negotiations.
NVC may be especially relevant to internal conflict within organizations and political movements. An example: in the winter of 2012, Occupy Boston splintered and began to fade away. One significant factor was that many activists were unable or unwilling to work with people with whom they had personal conflicts or personalized political differences. Despite efforts to bring people together and even to try NVC, activists on both sides resisted this kind of difficult conversation. Rather than explore strategies to meet needs, most either retreated to smaller projects where they could avoid people they did not like or dropped out of the movement completely.

My Occupy Boston experience was not unusual. The same factionalization occurred across the Occupy terrain. More important, it mirrored difficulties faced by activist groups time after time, year after year. Unproductive meetings, power imbalances, oppressive actions, competitiveness, jealousies—political work frequently collapses in the face of interpersonal and group tensions. This is not to say that Occupy or any other group should last forever. What seems clear to me, though, is that political work would often proceed more effectively if activists had better insight into their own emotional reactions and those of others, and if they had the skills to explore those reactions with less defensiveness, hostility, and certainty.

As with most tools, NVC can be used for both positive and negative ends. Recognizing the link between feelings and underlying needs can help someone manipulate others, and NVC’s way of redirecting heated communication to calmer discussion strikes some as artificial and deflating, or even oppressive; the Nonviolent Leadership for Social Justice Retreat explicitly addresses this perception, suggesting ways to make NVC more welcoming to people of color. But although these and other cautions are important, they do not detract from the benefits of learning how to get beneath the surface and move ahead together.

Human Awareness Institute (HAI)

The Human Awareness Institute, founded in 1968, has a broader agenda than NVC. Communication remains crucial, but especially as a tool in rethinking perspectives and learning skills explicitly related to “love, intimacy, and sexuality.” Like NVC, HAI too began with a psychologically oriented creator, Stan Dale, with a background in Transactional Analysis and a doctorate in Human
Sexuality.\(^4\) Offering weekend workshops mostly in the United States but also in Canada, Germany, the UK, Australia, and occasionally elsewhere, HAI explains its mission in broad terms:

The Human Awareness Institute (HAI) empowers individuals to be potent, loving, contributing human beings. HAI promotes personal growth and social evolution by replacing ignorance and fear with awareness and love.

HAI aims to create a world where people live together in dignity, respect, understanding, trust, kindness, compassion, reverence, honesty and love. The Human Awareness Institute is committed to creating a world where everyone wins.\(^5\)

Despite these comfortable generalities, and unlike NVC’s easy compatibility with mainstream lives, HAI aims to shatter common assumptions and habits, particularly those related to self-image, relationships, and sexuality. Workshops encourage participants to explore aspects of themselves they take for granted, to consider alternative perspectives, and to challenge their own boundaries—often in the zone between friend and lover—in safe, supportive settings. Although HAI as an organization has no explicit political agenda, Dale’s work developed with his late-1960s political immersion. Going back to Reich, Dale believed that understanding and breaking through sexual repression was crucial for creating a world of love and peace, though HAI adherents today differ widely among themselves about whether political activism is, or should be, a personal priority, and even about whether it is possible to change anything outside of oneself. The central focus is resolutely individualistic.

HAI offers a series of nine weekend workshops designed:

- to encourage participants to explore self-esteem, body image, boundaries, moving out of your head and into your heart, speaking your truth, and, more importantly, knowing what your truth is. . . . The workshops are also about communication and learning valuable, practical communication skills. We specialize in workshops that encompass

---


all relationships with an emphasis on empowering people to make the best choices for themselves every minute of every day.\textsuperscript{6}

The website’s FAQ notes that Level 1 includes an invitation to remove clothing as well as reassurance that all HAI exercises are optional, with participants always “at choice,” a term often used, explained, and, based on my participation at Level 1 and 2 workshops, accepted in practice. Exercises begin with activities such as eye gazing, face touching, one-to-one inquiry and disclosure, along with discussion of body image, relationship and sexual histories, and so on. In regions where large numbers of participants live, there are periodic get-togethers, parties, support groups, and active email interaction; members often talk about being part of the HAI Community.

Not everyone who participates in HAI comes away with positive impressions. The invitation to reveal deep parts of oneself, on top of the nudity and one-to-one disclosure, can lead to leaps in personal self-awareness but also to unexpected and unwelcome shifts in self-awareness, behavior, and relationship complexity. Some have accused the group of being a cult or tolerating abusive behavior, though there is little evidence of this and it has not been my experience.

More of a challenge for me has been adjusting to some exercises and language conventions that elicit eye rolling. Yet I am learning patience, appreciating new insights about aspects of myself I had not previously explored in a systematic way. I have come to appreciate HAI members who have learned to communicate about their wants and needs in what seem to me satisfying and useful ways. Although HAI’s lack of an explicit tie to societal change troubles me, I have chosen to remain at least on the outskirts of the community.

Network for a New Culture (NFNC)\textsuperscript{7}

In contrast to NVC, which teaches a specific approach to communication, and unlike HAI, which offers a highly structured workshop environment to guide participants through increasingly challenging experiences, Network for a New Culture is more eclectic. At ten-day camps on the US West Coast, East Coast,

\textsuperscript{7} See the website of the Network for a New Culture at: http://nfnc.org.
Parallels, Intersections, and Clashes

and in Hawaii, and at frequent weekend gatherings in various parts of the United States, NFNC creates settings that invite adult participants to explore their emotional, behavioral, and sexual assumptions. NVC often makes an appearance, along with other approaches to communication, and there may be a day-long introduction to HAI but also workshops on other forms of connection and personal growth such as Tantra, polyamory, body movement, dance, and games, as well as—at times—workshops on the link between personal lives and economic and political change. Like HAI, New Culture events are generally clothing optional, with an emphasis on accepting relationship variations and creating a sex-positive culture.

To a greater extent than NVC and HAI, NFNC talks about creating a “new culture” as part of a transition to broader social change. The website language often resembles NVC and HAI—“NFNC seeks to build a sustainable, violence-free culture through exploring intimacy, personal growth, transparency, radical honesty, equality, compassion, sexual freedom, and the power of community.” But NFNC gatherings and online discussions place somewhat more emphasis on creating actual community and on cultural change than do the other groups. At the five NFNC summer camps I have attended, and at many shorter gatherings, presenters have addressed systemic political and economic issues. Although NFNC is still not a political group, and most participants do not explore the political level as frequently or fervently as they do personal growth, intimacy, and sexuality, there is some effort to place personal growth and interpersonal connection in a broader societal context.

Initially, NFNC was inspired in part by two European intentional communities with a more explicit political emphasis: ZEGG, in Germany, founded in 1991, and Tamera, in Portugal, founded in 1995. Both ZEGG (a German acronym for “Center for Experimental Cultural Design”) and Tamera were based on the work of Dieter Duhm, a sociologist with a background in psychology, an early interest in Wilhelm Reich, and a belief that free love—or “love free of fear”—is necessary for creating a world at peace. For ZEGG and Tamera both, sexual freedom is not just an end in itself but a path to radical change. In keeping with its political aims, Tamera, where Duhm lives, has established Peace Villages in other countries: Columbia, Brazil, Kenya, and a short-term effort in Palestine.

8 See the website for ZEGG: http://www.zegg.de.
9 See the website for Tamera: http://www.tamera.org.
10 See the website of Dieter Duhm for more information: http://www.dieter-duhm.com.
For NFNC in the United States, on the other hand, where most members know nothing of Duhm’s work or the role of political thought and practice in ZEGG and Tamera, ridding ourselves of sexual repression and traditional views of relationships is, for most participants, an apolitical end in itself, personal growth for its own sake. What NFNC did take from ZEGG and Tamera is their system to help work through group tensions, especially tensions related to sexual jealousy, competitiveness, and possessiveness. Both communities use a regularly scheduled group forum where participants can choose to display their inner and interpersonal struggles to the larger group. For Network for a New Culture, this forum, which NFNC refers to as ZEGG Forum, is a central community practice, eliciting often-intense emotions that can lead to increased empathy, understanding, and connection.

I remain part of NFNC despite having lowered my initial expectations and despite disappointment at the group’s difficulty addressing some internal decision-making and power dynamics. As a workshop setting and as a network of likeminded people, NFNC has been, for me, a place to face significant personal challenges. But it is neither a political movement nor an intentional community, even though some members do live together in small groups and engage in political action outside the group. There seems to me little prospect of creating a larger ongoing community or a larger political project in the United States; ZEGG and Tamera, in contrast, both of which I visited briefly within the past year, have more potential for linking the personal and the political.

And Now?

It should be apparent that my explorations have brought mixed results. On the one hand, the positive: I have learned a lot about my own habits and assumptions, about patterns in my life, and about healthier, or at least potentially more satisfying, directions to turn, and I have also learned some useful skills to help me along. I have developed deep connections with many people, including some with interests and perspectives I would unlikely have appreciated in the past and some who use their new insights and skills to work for change in their own communities as well as in the larger society. And I have had a lot of fun.

But it is not all positive. I have been frustrated doing this work with people who, more often than not, are not drawn to political thinking and action, in settings mostly focused on the individual and the interpersonal
even while understanding that personal difficulties often have social and cultural origins. And—as might be expected—I have spent less time on direct political work than I might have without the lure of fixing myself. So my challenge remains: how to work on myself while also working beyond myself.

I continue to think it possible to learn skills and create communities to help us live closer to what we imagine is possible. While I agree with the anarchist Uri Gordon, who cautions that “these practices and lifestyles are in danger of congealing into a self-referential subculture that detracts from other areas of activity (e.g., direct action, propaganda, solidarity work),” I appreciate his adding “there is no reason why they should have to come at the expense of these.”11 Also useful is Marshall Rosenberg’s acknowledgment (2004, 5–6) that “spirituality can be reactionary if we get people to just be so calm and accepting and loving that they tolerate the dangerous structures. The spirituality that we need to develop for social change is one that mobilizes us for social change. It doesn’t just enable us to sit there and enjoy the world no matter what.”

Perhaps my own struggle with competing pulls has to do with the level of political change I imagine. Perhaps I am too impatient. In any case, the relevant question is whether psychology, in any of its therapeutic, research, or alternative guises, can contribute to a culture in which people live more fulfilling lives while also working toward a world that makes better lives possible for everyone. For me that is still an open question, but one worth exploring further.

REFERENCES


