

ARTICLE

SOCIAL ACTION WITH YOUTH: INTERVENTIONS, EVALUATION, AND PSYCHOPOLITICAL VALIDITY

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We describe two interventions designed to encourage community action with youth in a school and a community service setting. The school intervention took place with a Year 10 class, while the community-based intervention took place with a group of same-sex attracted youth. Using a participatory action research framework, youth in both settings devised a series of community projects to promote personal, group, and community wellness. Projects included drama presentations addressing homophobia, designing an aboriginal public garden, children's activities in a cultural festival for refugees, a drug-free underage dance party, a community theatre group, and a student battle of the bands. We evaluated the various community projects using self-reports, videotapes, and ethnographic data. While goals of personal and group wellness were meaningfully met, wellness at the community level was harder to achieve. Introducing a tool for the evaluation of psychopolitical validity, we examined the degree of both epistemic and transformational validity present in the interventions. Our assessment indicates that (a) psychological changes are easier to achieve than political transformations, (b) epistemic validity is easier to accomplish than transformational validity, and (c) changes at the personal and group levels are easier to achieve than changes at the community level. © 2007 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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Three concepts and three levels of analysis shape much of community psychology's concerns: oppression, liberation, and wellness at the personal, group, and community levels (Nelson & Prilleltensky, in press; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003). A fourth concept is deeply embedded in the nine cells created by this three-by-three imaginary table: power (Prilleltensky, in press). How do power differentials within and between groups promote oppression? What is the role of power in personal wellness? How do communities empower themselves to attain higher levels of wellness? For many researchers and practitioners, the dynamic interaction among these constructs is at the heart of community psychology. In this article, we illustrate how youth who experience oppression in various ways can engage in empowering processes to enhance levels of wellness at the personal, group, and community levels.

PSYCHOPOLITICAL VALIDITY

Our research and action is informed by the concept of psychopolitical validity (PPV). This form of validity refers to the extent to which research and action take into account power dynamics in psychological and political domains affecting oppression, liberation, and wellness at the personal, group, and community levels (Prilleltensky, 2003a, 2003b; in press). With respect to research, PPV requires that we take into account how power differentials affect the phenomena under study. With respect to action, PPV requires that we challenge power inequality in order to minimize oppression and maximize liberation and wellness. The concept of PPV focuses attention on the central role of power in explaining and altering conditions of oppression, in understanding processes of liberation, and in fostering wellness for individuals, groups, and communities at large.

PPV builds on well-established bodies of knowledge, such as empowerment, oppression, liberation, and wellness (Nelson & Prilleltensky, in press; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003). Furthermore, it builds on community psychology's tradition of multilevel analyses and interventions. The main innovation implicit in PPV is to accentuate the role of power in all these domains and to expect that practitioners and researchers pay attention to it as a matter of urgency. Abundant research demonstrates the "power of power" as an explanatory and potentially transformative construct (Chomsky, 2002; Craig & Craig, 1979; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001).

Community psychologists strive to enact long lasting interventions that take power away from the over-empowered and rechannel it to the disempowered (Huygens, 1995, 1997). Few succeed in sustaining interventions that empower oppressed communities and enhance personal and relational wellness at the same time. Speer and colleagues have documented exemplary community work that challenges illegitimate power through relational processes that enhance group and personal wellness at the same time (Speer & Hughey, 1995; Speer, Hughey, Gensheimer, & Adams-Leavitt, 1995). They come to the conclusion that enduring collective action to challenge oppression or to promote liberation cannot be sustained in the absence of strong bonds among movement participants. Building on this lesson, in this article we explore how group processes with youth may lead to modest advances in PPV. We report work with disadvantaged youth who engaged in civic and social action to enhance their own wellness and the wellness of the community at large. Through empowering group processes young people were able to reflect on their own oppression and take action.

Transformational PPV calls for a reduction in power inequality. As such, it is a tall order. Far from presenting our interventions as exemplars of transformational PPV, we

use them to explore the challenges inherent in achieving it. We are interested in learning how youth can contribute towards the elimination of certain forms of oppression through collaborative group processes. Although the youth in our interventions experience oppression and discrimination on a number of counts, our research shows that they can become active agents of change. As we note below, while others have documented the potential contributions of youth to the community, few have examined the explicitly political dimensions of social action with youth. We hope to make a contribution to the literature on youth civic engagement by concentrating on the work of disadvantaged youth through the lens of PPV. Thus, we hope to illuminate certain dynamics unique to youth engagement in oppressed communities and to throw light on PPV at the same time.

SOCIAL ACTION WITH YOUTH

The literature describes primarily two types of social involvement of youth. One type is related to civic engagement. This kind of involvement describes service learning opportunities and volunteering in a range of organizations like hospitals, senior citizens homes, community clubs, and others (DeVitis, Johns, & Simpson, 1998; Kohler, 1982; Youniss et al., 2002; Youniss & Yates, 1999). In our view, this type of contribution is primarily ameliorative because it does not challenge the societal status quo. The primary focus is to assist people in need or build community. The second type may be called transformational, for it strives to alter the conditions that lead to social problems in the first place. This approach does challenge the status quo and is more explicitly concerned with changing political structures. This can take many forms, such as young people organizing social action campaigns or being involved in youth consultation processes with local government (Ginwright & James, 2002; Headley, 2002; Lewis, 1998; Potts, 2003). Some efforts to involve youth in community work fall somewhere in between these two approaches, emphasizing community building and participatory approaches to youth involvement in community life (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Cadell Karabanow, & Sanchez, 2001; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Holdsworth, Cahill & Smith, 2003; Pretty, 2002; Yates & Youniss, 1999; Watts et al., 2003).

We identify strongly with the transformational approach but recognize the challenges inherent in promoting it. First, it is difficult to engage youth in social change because most avenues for youth involvement are ameliorative in nature. Second, social change is not a high priority for adults, let alone youth. Third, social change is arduous and requires long-term commitments that may not be in line with young people's agendas. These barriers reduce the likelihood that youth will engage in transformational work.

Our research project is called SAY, which stands for Social Action with Youth. In our interventions, we gave young people choices as to the kind of projects they wanted to work on, and thus they have a SAY in their local community. A social group of same-sex attracted young people engaged in the most political type of social action: a series of dramatic skits addressing homophobia. The school students chose to do more ameliorative work, like organizing drug-free recreational activities for children and youth. This is not to diminish the contributions of the latter but to be clear that even though our project is called social action with youth, some projects would not qualify, in some people's minds, for social action but rather for civic engagement.

RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION APPROACH

We followed an action research orientation (Atweh et al., 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2001, Wadsworth, 1997). This approach is in line with the philosophy of PPV. Action research enlists community participants as partners. Interventions are designed in collaboration by researchers and participants and they typically reflect concerns elicited by community members themselves. The very process of identifying issues and devising actions empowers participants. Voice is given to the preference of participants and efforts are made to have them drive the process. There is a transmission of skills from researchers to participants that enable the latter to be, as much as possible, in control of the project.

Previous work has demonstrated the potential of action research with youth. Young people can become active co-researchers on youth-focused research with professionals (Alder & Sandor, 1990; DeVitis et al., 1998; Schwab, 1997; Yates & Youniss, 1999). We used in our work an action research approach to impassion students. The first author, who worked with young people in a school and a community-based setting, was careful to assist them to identify community projects that related to the participants' passions. To do that, she spent time using a focus group format with guided group discussions to identify issues that the young people cared deeply about. This process enabled young people to think critically about their own sense of self in relation to local issues and to engage in actions that would improve their own well being as well as that of the community.

The two youth groups, reported here, are part of a multisite intervention project involving four different sites. Two additional groups, not reported here, participated in the project late in 2003. The first group consisted of young refugees from the Horn of Africa. The second group was self-selected students in Years 9–12 across various local schools in partnership with various youth workers and a local government council.

The participatory philosophy of the project is captured in its name: social action with youth (SAY). This SAY project has been developed in partnership with a local community service agency, Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service (Melbourne). The first two interventions were completed early in 2003. Although they had similar goals, they differed somewhat in focus and point of departure. Next, we describe the context, aims, methods, evaluation, and outcomes of each intervention.

YOUTH GROUP I: HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

Context

The first intervention took place with a Year 10 class in a low-income community in the North Western suburbs of Melbourne. The school is located in the City of Brimbank, which has one of the lowest socioeconomic status levels of the State of Victoria, very high unemployment, and very low school retention rates (Victorian Government, 2000; Brimbank City Council, 2000). Despite this grim picture, the area has attracted disproportionately low levels of government funding for youth, family, and community services.

The first author worked collaboratively with a teacher for the second semester of the academic year 2002 (Morsillo, 2003). The class was an elective course, part of a pilot project called *Working Community Program* (Department of Education & Training Victoria, 2002). The philosophy of the program is congruent with our own participatory action research orientation. The program aims to link young people with local

community agencies to develop organizational skills and a sense of personal and social responsibility in a supportive environment (Department of Education & Training Victoria, 2002).

Participants

The class consisted of 24 students, 12 female and 12 male, 15 to 16 years of age, from diverse ethnic backgrounds: Anglo-Saxon, Indian, Italian, Greek, Macedonian, Maltese, Spanish and Vietnamese. Students’ backgrounds reflected the ethnic composition of the local community. Some of these students had been encouraged to participate in this class by teachers concerned with signs of school disengagement. It was believed that if students could participate in positive community projects of their choosing, this could enhance their self-esteem and prospects for school re-engagement as well as provide skills for further educational and employment pathways.

Objective and Interventions

The main objectives and interventions were related to the development of personal sociopolitical awareness, group organizational skills, and community problem solving skills. (See Table 1.) To effect change at various levels of analysis, community projects had specific personal, group, and community aims. The general objectives and processes for these community projects are briefly described in Table 1.

The first author developed a range of activities to invite young people to think critically about their own passions and their own community concerns, including games, group posters, guided discussions, and a session with guest speakers from local agencies to raise consciousness of sociopolitical thinking. The young people were also challenged to brainstorm possibilities for action to make a positive contribution to their local community.

Based on common interests, students were invited to form small groups (2 to 8 students) to independently design and implement a community project. The groups

Table 1. Objectives and Community Projects

	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Processes</i>
For individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop socio-political awareness through guided group discussions • Develop sense of control and participatory competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities that linked personal passions to community issues and concerns • Participation in youth-designed and youth-led community actions
For groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop participation and organisational skills in small group environment • Develop solidarity and supported group cohesion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video and role plays on teamwork, leadership and communication skills • Develop small group project with action plan
For community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to community awareness of youth issues • Participate in community problem-solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with local community agencies on youth issues • Completing small scale project to address community problem

developed specific project aims through guided discussions. These interests and concerns were developed into specific youth-designed community action projects. Projects had to be completed, or at least initiated, in less than 3 months, and they had to involve a community agency or local business. The program consisted of three sessions per week, for a total of 4 hours per week for 12 weeks, plus a full day introductory session and a full day celebratory session at the end of the program. Students, teacher, and researcher considered the feasibility of various projects and sought appropriate community connections to work with partners to complete each project.

The first author spent a great deal of time interacting with community players who may be able to collaborate with the students on possible community projects. She developed a network of collaborators with community workers, local advocates, and media outlets. She was able to provide connections for students so that they could organize their own projects and events. She facilitated collaboration with grass roots organizations and lobbied city council to obtain additional resources when required.

After much class and small group discussions, the students divided themselves into five groups and chose to organize the following activities:

1. A drug-free underage dance party. Eight students (five males and three females) expressed concern that there was too much drug-abuse in the area and too little drug-free entertainment for young people. As a result, they organized their own drug-free underage dance party.
2. A student battle of the bands. Two students (one male and one female) were concerned with the need for exposure to alternative music and offered to assist the music teacher to organize a live performance—a battle of the bands at the school.
3. A new community theatre company. Three female students were concerned with lack of opportunities for young people to perform in amateur theatre. Therefore, they organized their own singing and dance performance at a local shopping mall and applied for a local council community grant to start their own community theatre company.
4. Children's activities for a refugee cultural festival. Six female students offered to help at a refugee cultural festival being organized by the local community. In collaboration with the local migrant resource center, they organized face painting and children's activities.
5. Design an aboriginal garden with the help of an Aboriginal Park Ranger. Four male students were concerned with the lack of suitably designed parklands in the community. They were connected to the local indigenous park ranger, who offered them several options. The boys chose to research and design an aboriginal garden in close collaboration with the park ranger.

Each student group worked independently, with minimal support from the teacher and researcher, reporting weekly in their planning and action progress to the rest of the class. Class and teachers offered feedback as a way of reflecting on their action projects.

Evaluation Methods

Two qualitative methods were used to evaluate the outcomes of the various community projects: self-reported evaluations by the young people themselves and

ethnographic observations. Students worked in small groups according to their areas of interest. Throughout the entire process, groups engaged in reflective practice and considered the benefits and challenges associated with each step of the work. Students recorded their self-evaluations and shared them with their action group and with the class, teacher, and researcher. This process took place regularly throughout the life of the projects. In addition, at the completion of their projects, each group evaluated their work on videotape. Also, each student provided written answers to open-ended questions about their own personal part in the project and how they felt about doing the work. These self-reported evaluations were used for analyses of the process and outcomes associated with each project.

The second form of evaluation consisted of ethnographic observations conducted by the researcher in the school and the community-based setting. The data includes the researcher's observations of transactions in small groups and in the local community. This also includes verbal and written observations from the teacher and spontaneous comments with letters from various community agency workers who interacted with students.

The qualitative data was analysed by reviewing systematically all the extensive written and verbal reports from focus group discussions and individual written reports from open-ended questions produced by each of the 24 students, along with a careful examination of the ethnographic material. Video footage was also used to reflect on group processes and young people's perceptions. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse students' spontaneous and independent comments.

A quantitative survey was piloted with each group in both settings; but, due to small numbers (and a changing population with the second intervention group), this did not yield reliable comparisons.

Outcomes

Encouraging outcomes were observed at the three levels of intervention. In part, this may be due to the successful completion of most projects. Students felt rewarded by the recognition they obtained from the community at large. Some of the projects were promoted and reported in the local newspaper, adding visibility and credibility to students' work. Students, researcher, teacher, and community workers report positive outcomes for the youth and the neighbourhood as a whole. In fact, students consistently reported positive outcomes about being involved in community projects. The students consistently reported a positive learning experience in working independently as part of a supportive team effort. The written reports closely reflected the verbal reports in the focus group discussions and videoed sessions. Also, verbal and written comments closely reflected the themes emerging from ethnographic material. We report some outcomes that affected individual youth, their group, and the community as a whole.

For Individuals. Four positive developments took place in the students carrying out the projects. The first encouraging sign was *enhanced sociopolitical awareness*. Students planning and executing the various projects realized the influence of power dynamics in their lives. A student commented that during the process he "learned a lot about how the world works." Another young participant noted that the work "opened my eyes to the needs of our youth," while a third one observed that the intervention

“developed my awareness to community issues and helping out in the community.” These are just a few examples of many similar comments made by students.

The second positive outcome was *enhanced sense of control and social responsibility*. One young person was proud to declare, “I took on adult responsibilities,” while another expressed, “sense of satisfaction that you were able to put something back into the community for once.”

The third noticeable change was *hopefulness* in young people’s perceptions about their ability to make a change. Students moved from, “What can we do? We are only kids; we don’t have any connections” to “I can still contribute to the community, making a small difference which sums up with other people’s efforts, to make a big difference overall.”

The fourth outcome refers to students’ *community participation skills*. They organized and attended meetings with community service workers, business people, politicians, and others. In addition, they learned about obtaining permits, bureaucracy, and the inner workings of local government. One student observed that “you get to interact with other people in the community, which is a thing you wouldn’t normally do,” while another commented that “meetings with community service workers gave us the independence and presented us with problems that we had to tackle, not just as individuals, but as a group.”

For the Groups. The first outcome relates to *independence and motivation* of groups. Although students felt somewhat overwhelmed, at first, by the task and the independence they were given, they gradually gained confidence in their ability to see the projects through. The group that organized the drug-free underage dance party went on to organize, independently, a second and bigger one. This is particularly impressive given that a few of the boys in this group initially took the class only to avoid more academic courses. These boys initiated and organized another successful dance party in their own time.

Group effectiveness was an important skill developed in the small teams. A student observed that the project “helped me become independent and able to organize with my group an event with hardly any assistance.” As part of a supportive team effort organizing children’s activities, another student was happy to have developed “confidence, communication, organizing and independence.” Reflecting on their initial hesitation, a student commented that now “we can organize and do what we want if we really want it.”

In addition to independence, motivation, and group effectiveness, students experienced *cohesion and solidarity*. Students relished the sense of belonging that evolved over the course of the challenge. “The highlight was the satisfaction we all felt when the night of the dance party that we had been planning, stressing over and having sleepless nights about became a rip roaring success. It was a real adrenalin rush for all of us.”

For the Community. Not only did students benefit from their participation in community activities, it is likely that the community as a whole benefited as well. The community gained *enhanced youth involvement* in local affairs during the projects. Also, one of the students who undertook the program went on to volunteer in an ongoing capacity to be a member of the Youth Advisory Council with the local government.

Four out of the five community projects implemented came to a successful completion:

1. The drug-free underage dance party was enjoyed without incident by hundreds of local young people with positive reports in the local media.
2. “Alternative music” students appreciated a chance to perform at the battle of the bands organized by fellow students and school music teacher.
3. The local government council appreciated the positive initiative of young people applying for a local community grant to start their own community theatre.
4. Children’s face painting and activities for a refugee cultural festival organized by a group of female students was greatly appreciated by festival organizers and the parents.
5. The Aboriginal Park Ranger appreciated the initiation and dedication of a small group of Australian and Vietnamese boys researching and designing a small Aboriginal park in collaboration with him. The actual aboriginal garden initiative could not be completed due to time and bureaucratic constraints.

In summary, the various projects, organized and carried out by the young people themselves, made a contribution, however small, to the community and its youth.

INTERVENTION II: COMMUNITY SETTING

Context

The second group, Generation Q, is a social group of same-sex attracted young people. The group members identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual. However, for young people particularly, sexuality can be fluid, so the term same-sex attracted youth has come into use by researchers and youth workers in recent years (Hillier et al. 1998; Victorian Child and Adolescent Mental Health Promotion Officers & Farnan, 2001).

The group met for 2 hours weekly for mutual support and friendship with a youth worker from Good Shepherd Youth & Family Services. Like the previous intervention, this one also took place in the North Western suburbs of Melbourne. The researcher worked with the group and their youth worker from October 2002 to May 2003, including an intensive weekend camp.

Participants

This same-sex attracted youth social group had a total of 16 members and an average attendance of 8 people per week. The group consisted of half female and half male members aged 16–21 years. Their educational and employment status varied. Half of this social group attended late secondary school (8), three attended community college, two were in casual work, two were homeless and unemployed, and one became a single parent during the intervention. The group was primarily of Anglo-Saxon origin, with one Maltese, one Sri-Lankan, and one Indigenous Australian.

Objective and Interventions

The objectives for this group paralleled the aims of the high school intervention. (See Table 1.) The researcher used similar activities to elicit young people’s passions. It quickly became apparent that this group already had a strong sense of sociopolitical

awareness due to their sexual orientation and shared experiences of discrimination in the community. Youth expressed grave concern about the homophobic attitudes of the local community. Naturally, they targeted their community action project toward homophobia.

The young people appreciated the chance to express their concerns about homophobic attitudes. These oppressive experiences had affected them personally in profound ways. As the group showed great interest in community theatre, the group's youth worker suggested they work on a drama production to be at an upcoming teacher's forum in the local community. The young people enthusiastically agreed. In addition, they contributed their creative work toward a manual on friendly environments in school for same-sex attracted youth.

Evaluation Methods

The two evaluation methods used with the high school group were replicated in this community setting. Members of the group evaluated their work through verbal and written self-reporting and video footage taken at an intensive weekend camp. The first author, who was co-facilitator with the youth worker, took extensive ethnographic notes about the evolution of the program and participants' interactions with others in the community.

Outcomes

Initially, half the group did not believe that they could make a difference in their community to overcome homophobic attitudes. Yet every member of the group participated in developing drama scenarios on homophobia. Sceptical members of the group were persuaded by the rest of the team that something could be done about their own discrimination in the community. Their mutual concern about homophobia and drama ignited the group's passion for action. Mounting dramatic scenarios with audience participation at a teachers' forum generated some impact for the audience and performers alike.

The structure of this group was much more informal than the school group. Amidst much socializing and sharing of dramatic life events, all members of the group contributed to the discussions and workshopping of the drama productions. While only a few from the group were available to perform at the forum, most had contributed significant materials during the sessions and the intensive weekend camp and expressed appreciation for the opportunity.

For Individuals. Several young people enjoyed the opportunity for *self-expression*. "I enjoyed acting and expressing myself," observed one participant during the process; while another commented, "being a part of the forum for teachers was a great experience to express my thoughts." Beyond self-expression, the teamwork also promoted *assertiveness*. Youth experimented with telling the community what they really thought about homophobia. Some, for the first time, asserted their views in public: "I got to talk about how I felt and it was great." Two members of the group gave impromptu speeches at the teachers' forum and they reported feeling "wonderful." They related personal experiences of homophobia that were highly valued and appreciated by the teachers in the room. For some, participation in the project went beyond assertiveness; presenting in front of teachers was nothing short of a *liberating experience*. "The

forum was the best experience out of all! All these people were totally willing to listen to our thoughts on how to fix the homophobia problems at schools!”

For the Group. The self-expression and assertiveness reported by youth could not have occurred without *acceptance and peer support* within the group. “It is good having a place to be free to make friends and have fun and to express ourselves and to be what we want to be; it helps us to deal with gay issues and not to be afraid of being gay.” Another group member observed that, “you don’t feel threatened at all when you are around the group cause you can be yourself and you won’t get discriminated against.” Another participant enjoyed “being able to be ourselves and work together.”

Related to self-expression was the *creative group process*: “I enjoyed making our own drama ideas groups and working in groups and talking about what we wanted.” This process enabled the group to be creative, enjoyable, and empowering. The accepting atmosphere and the passion for drama ignited imagination, playfulness and fun.

For the Community. The community benefited in two ways. Similar to the first intervention, there was *enhanced youth involvement* in community affairs. In addition, the specific group of hundreds of local teachers attending the drama presentation learned about homophobia in schools from youth who experienced it first hand. The teachers cheered the young people for their presentations and many personally thanked the young participants for their valuable contribution to the forum and to their policy manual on same-sex friendly environments on schools. Thus, the young people contributed to *enhanced community awareness* about a particular form of oppression. Additionally, a member of the group went on to volunteer with a community radio program, where she was given a weekly spot for a semester to talk about social issues of concern for youth. Also, the group as a whole has since organized their own local community forum for young people on homophobia with their youth leader and another student from Victoria University.

DISCUSSION

We wish to address here two main questions: (a) to what extent did the interventions achieve their goals? and (b) to what extent did the interventions achieve PPV? We consider each one in turn.

Goal Achievement

Table 2 summarizes the main outcomes for the two interventions groups. Comparing these outcomes with the objectives set out in Table 1, it may be said that the interventions achieved most of their goals. At the personal level, young people developed sociopolitical awareness, sense of control, participatory skills, assertiveness, and even experiences of liberation. At the group level, participants gained skills in teamwork and experienced solidarity, acceptance and peer support. The community benefited from enhanced youth involvement in community affairs and from enhanced community awareness regarding issues affecting same-sex attracted youth.

Although there are parallels between the two main intervention groups, as noted in Table 2, there are also some differences. The differences stem from the fact that the groups started in different places of sociopolitical awareness. The group with same-sex attracted youth already had a fair degree of consciousness about oppression and

Table 2. Summary of Outcomes for Intervention Groups

	<i>School student group</i>	<i>Same-sex attracted youth group</i>
For individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced socio-political awareness • Sense of control and social responsibility • Hopefulness • Community participation skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-expression • Assertiveness • Liberating experience
For groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence and motivation • Group effectiveness • Cohesion and solidarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance and peer support • Creative group process
For community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced youth involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced youth involvement • Enhanced community awareness of same-sex attracted youth issues

liberation. By virtue of their sexual orientation, they had been subjected to discrimination in the community. For the members of the group who performed, the highlight of their experience was the liberating moments associated with telling their truth in front of teachers. Other members involved in the process of developing the scenarios also expressed appreciation for being able to express themselves openly within the group, without fear of discrimination or negative repercussions.

In our view, gains for both groups were achieved through positive interactions across a number of factors: personal passions, supportive, and creative group processes and community action. This sequence has already been documented in the empowerment literature: Individuals connect with others who experience similar vicissitudes, they take collective action, and the ensuing intervention reinforces both the group and the individual participating in it (Lord & Hutchins, 1993; Kieffer, 1984; Zimmerman, 2000). Both of our groups went through similar processes. Starting with the identification of personal passions and proceeding to work in small groups, projects culminated in community actions that rewarded participants both individually and as a group.

It is of interest to note the power dynamics operating in both interventions. Power may be defined in terms of the capacity and opportunity to effect change at the personal, group, or community levels (Prilleltensky, in press). While young people had the inherent capacity to make positive changes for themselves and the community at large, several of them expressed doubt at their own ability to have a positive impact. We think that their hesitation derived not so much from lack of capacity but rather from lack of opportunity. What our interventions demonstrated, at least for our groups, is that lack of opportunities translates into self-doubt. Additionally, we learned that exposure to community action, in a supportive environment, can lead to feelings of effectiveness and satisfaction, and also to modest contributions to the community. The relative contrast between fairly substantive personal and group gains and rather minor community gains can be explained by exploring psychopolitical validity.

PSYCHOPOLITICAL VALIDITY

Hitherto, the concept of PPV has been discussed primarily as a theoretical notion. In this article, we translate the main tenets of PPV into a tool for the evaluation of social interventions. PPV is broken down into epistemic (EPPV) and transformational (TPPV)

(Prilleltensky, 2003a, 2003b, in press). Whereas the former refers to the extent that power is considered in political and psychological dynamics affecting oppression, liberation, and wellness, the latter refers to the extent that actual change takes place in these domains as a result of particular interventions.

Table 3 introduces a tool for the evaluation of PPV in social interventions. As may be seen, the left-hand side addresses EPPV, while the right hand side considers TPPV. An asterisk is used to judge the degree of TPPV and a number symbol to denote EPPV. We, the researchers, made those judgements after the interventions were completed. The ratings presented in Table 3 represent our own evaluation of our intervention. It is based on all the data collected and the evaluation outcomes. We use Table 3 as a tool for reflection on the PPV of our own intervention. It is a considered assessment, but it is not an objective tool.

Some interesting patterns emerged for us. First, the levels of EPPV are generally higher than the levels of TPPV. This may be just a reflection of the fact that thinking is easier than doing. Learning about conflictive situations is easier than changing them. Not an earthshattering revelation on our part. The next observation is that within TPPV, stronger changes were observed in the psychological domain rather than in the political domain; once again, not a surprising finding. It is easier to change some perceptions, and even some feelings, than to change political structures. Psychologically speaking, our participants gained sense of control, a measure of assertiveness, acceptance, and self-expression. To what extent they gained actual political power is, by far, a harder question to answer. This led to our assessment that there were probably more psychological than political impacts.

Still within TPPV, more promising gains were observed at the personal and group levels than at the collective level. We think the youth, individually and as a group, probably gained something from participating in the community project interventions, but we are not sure that the communities will have changed meaningfully in some sense. Although the various projects affected the community in various ways (teacher awareness, underage dance parties for youth, new community theatre group), we are just not sure about the durability and sustainability of the efforts. A hopeful sign was that the same group that organized the underage dance party took it upon themselves to organize, independently, a second and bigger one. Also, the same-sex attracted youth

Table 3. Approximate Levels of Epistemic and Transformational Psychopolitical Validity (PPV) in Interventions

Epistemic PPV (#)	<i>Minimal</i>		<i>Great</i>		<i>Transformational PPV (*)</i>	
To what extent was the role of power considered in	1	2	3	4	5	To what extent were there positive changes in
1. Psychological dynamics affecting target group			*	#		1. Psychological dynamics affecting target group
2. Political dynamics affecting target group	*		#			2. Political dynamics affecting target group
3. Personal dynamics of oppression		*	#			3. Personal levels of oppression
4. Personal dynamics of liberation			*	#		4. Personal processes of liberation
5. Personal dynamics of wellness		*	#			5. Personal wellness
6. Group dynamics of oppression	*		#			6. Group levels of oppression
7. Group dynamics of liberation			*	#		7. Group processes of liberation
8. Group dynamics of wellness		*	#			8. Group wellness
9. Collective dynamics of oppression	*		#			9. Collective levels of oppression
10. Collective dynamics of liberation	*		#			10. Collective processes of liberation
11. Collective dynamics of wellness	*		#			11. Collective wellness

went on to organize another small local forum on homophobia of their own. Additionally, a couple of individuals went on to be involved with the local government and local community radio dealing with social issues. We hope that these optimistic signs show some small steps towards sustainable community development. Time will tell.

In comparing EPPV and TPPV, the largest distance between awareness and action is also in the collective domain. As researchers, we are very aware of how the low socioeconomic status of the community, its poor reputation in the media, its high levels of crime, and other disheartening statistics, affect the lives of youth in the region. But our acute awareness is hard to translate into effective actions at the collective level. Processes of sustainability would have to be put in place to make the positive effects last, while dissemination and recruitment will have to take place to expand the scope of the programs. As community psychologists, this is our next challenge.

CONCLUSION

We can draw some lessons for the young people, for the community, for practitioners, and for researchers. The young people we worked with have the capacity and interest to make a change, but they don't always have the opportunity to channel their energy in that direction. When presented with an opportunity and a structure, all the youth we worked with took advantage of the chance to improve an aspect of their lives and their communities. Living in an ill-reputed part of town can demoralize young people (Victorian Government, 2000). Living with homophobia and bigotry disempowers same-sex attracted youth even further (Hillier et al., 1998; Ollis et al., 2002). Yet, interventions of the sort presented here hold hope for overcoming personal and collective feelings of hopelessness.

To the community, we would like to tell how important projects of this nature are. The department of education in Victoria, which introduced the idea of a course on community issues, deserves recognition. We would encourage them to get past the pilot phase and institutionalize the course. Students worked meaningfully and passionately on their projects. In poor and ill resourced communities, social action with youth is eminently important for the development of resilience and wellness. Schools, nongovernment organizations, and local government need to cooperate to create opportunities for young people to be involved in the life of the community.

The results suggest that practitioners need to focus extra effort on sustaining innovative projects. However promising the interventions described here may be, unless they last and become institutionalized they risk joining the venerable list of one-off promising projects that never took hold in the community. An equally important message is to try and involve as many community players as possible. As noted in our test of PPV, the collective sphere is the one least affected by our interventions. We need to find imaginative ways to expand the reach beyond the individual and group levels.

Researchers may wish to experiment with the use of PPV in their own work. We translated here for the first time the basic tenets of PPV into an evaluation tool. An application of the tool may encourage researchers to concentrate on the ever crucial yet often neglected role of power in oppression, liberation, and wellness. The instrument presented in Table 3 may be used to assess either kind of PPV or both at the same time, as we did. When both are evaluated, interesting comparisons can be made across domains and levels of analysis. The use of EPPV and TPPV can identify blind spots and lead us to sounder findings and more effective interventions. This, at least, is our hope.

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