Taking action toward racial and economic justice: An interview with Rebecca L. Toporek

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Abstract

On November 21, 2024, we had the great honor, privilege, and pleasure to conduct a highly revealing, engaging, and intimate interview with Professor Rebecca L. Toporek about their lifelong investment in social justice and action work. Professor Toporek serves as a faculty member in the Department of Counseling at San Francisco State University. They have been a psychologist and counselor educator for 20 years after serving as a community college counselor and associate dean. Their scholarship has focused on social justice advocacy and activism, backlash, racism, economic justice, and college and career counseling. They have written or co-written over 70 journal articles and book chapters, were co-editor and co-founder of the *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, co-developer of the American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies, and co-edited five books on multicultural practice and social justice including *Taking Action: Creating Social Change through Strength, Solidarity, Strategy and Sustainability*. They co-produced the video, *Helping counselors and psychologists as advocates and activists*. They are also a daughter, sister, partner, and mother of two awesome 20-somethings. Our interview with Professor Toporek addressed their long-standing experiences that led to their social justice and action work, their role models and mentors, and their challenges and opportunities. Professor Toporek also shared their thoughts on how counseling and psychology have evolved in terms of social justice and action work, and where the fields were heading. Finally, Professor Toporek reflected on the 18-year history of the *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, and they presented recommendations to strengthen the journal.

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Co-Editors: How did you get interested in social justice and social action work Rebecca?

Toporek: I think it was kind of embedded in the values that my parents had. In my family, the two that stood out were values of fairness and equity. I was raised Catholic, and a part of the Catholic lens that my parents had was really more about anti-poverty, giving, and a responsibility toward others. Even though I didn't continue practicing once I became an adult, those values were still really embedded. My dad was a university professor during the sixties, seventies eighties, and nineties, and I remember our family participating in peace rallies as a child as well as attending other related events. My parents were not U.S. citizens, so I remember receiving the message that we shouldn't be visibly involved. I think my parents, especially my dad, was more philosophically an activist than in practice.

There were all sorts of lessons I learned as a teenager, and then, as an undergraduate. I went into psychology and social work really trying to understand life and human behavior. I wasn't active in social action at all during my high school or undergraduate years and didn't take any social justice classes other than some sociology and criminology courses focused on white collar crime and things like that. Most of the people I knew were engineering students, and they weren't justice oriented. After my bachelor's degree, I began a master's in counseling graduate program at the University of Oregon, which focused a lot on introspection and alternative lifestyles, but not political action. I didn't really start to get involved in social action until I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area once I graduated with my master's. My first post-master's job was in a nonprofit career center where we had contracts with different local cities and counties. One city was a very wealthy community in the Bay area. Most of the clientele from that organization were white upper middle-class women, many of whom were in the process of divorce, and were for the 1st time realizing they were going to have to be financially independent. We also had contracts with a different city providing services to clients who were experiencing poverty, housing instability, and food instability. There was one contract focused specifically on serving pregnant teenage mothers. We had really diverse clientele on opposite sides of a privilege spectrum which was such an illustration of disparities. I was more comfortable, and much more committed to the clients that we served on the side of lesser resources. Seeing that disparity I felt my graduate program didn't really provide the skills for doing the multicultural and advocacy work that was necessary for many of my clients. I determined that I needed to educate myself to work with diverse populations, especially in terms of culture and poverty, and began seeking any professional development I could.

My next job was in community college counseling. In this job I was a coordinator for what was basically a welfare to work type program. I was the liaison at the community college for students who were receiving public assistance with dependent children and were going to community college, as opposed to, being forced into getting a job with very little education and work skills. I was a liaison between the department of social services, the students and the college. We supported the students to get book vouchers, transportation vouchers, and childcare. We also helped with their transition and culture shock of being in the community college, because most of them had never been in higher education before, at least not in the U.S. Many of the students were former refugees or refugees. It was again, one of those situations where it was really clear that advocacy was necessary. Four weeks into the semester, the students would say things like I don't have my books, my childcare isn't set, and I don't have my transportation vouchers. And I would say "have you talked with your caseworker." They would reply "I've tried calling, and they're not calling me back." And I would say, "well, let's call together." So, we would call, and I noticed that if I said my name and my title very quickly, then I was less likely to be put on hold. I started to observe these different things and felt even more frustrated that my graduate program didn't really prepare me for this critical aspect of counseling. The student and I could talk until we were blue in the face but if they didn't have their housing, didn't have transportation, and didn't have food we were not going to get very far. During this time, I continued to read, attend workshops, and engage in any opportunities about multicultural counseling. A lot

of what I found focused on self-understanding which I felt frustrated by because I thought what I really needed was to know how to work with clients who were different from me. For example, two books I came across were Pedersen's *"Handbook for Developing Multicultural Awareness"* and Katz's *"White Awareness Handbook"* in the late 1980's. A huge turning point for me happened when I serendipitously attended a workshop that was framed around Janet Helms's Interactional Model of Racial Identity. It was finally clear to me why I needed to understand what it meant to be white as a counselor and how that interacted with the client's racial identity and shaped the counseling process, intentionally or unintentionally. I committed to focus on racial justice and my part as a white person in a system that was racially unjust.

In my next community college counseling job, I was fortunate to meet, learn from, and observe several amazing social justice advocates who were in my department. I started to learn about embedded racism in higher education, cultural humility, community organizing and integrating multicultural counseling into our work. There was, however, a lot of tension in the department between counselors who prioritized client-centered therapy and academic advising without any cultural counseling component. An experience that solidified my commitment to action was related to a situation that came up on campus where several colleagues and I took action and then ended up in a lawsuit. I'll talk more about that later. My experience with this lawsuit and my mentors solidified my social justice skills and interest. Even before this incident, when I started this counseling position, I also started to venture down the path of understanding what it means to be a white person in this country, my community, and my profession. So, the social action that I began to get involved with was more about race and racism in our organization and in the counseling profession.

That's sort of how I came to social justice and action work. Years later, as a counselor educator and professor, a couple of students and I co-wrote a chapter about developing as a social justice-oriented counselor. In preparing to write the chapter, we recognized that we had each come to social action from one of three paths. I felt like I came from an academic path although my family values set the foundation. My experiences in my counseling practice informed me about what was necessary. One of my other co-authors, an Afro-Latino man, who now is a practicing psychologist in Colorado, was a community organizer and activist prior to coming into counseling. He had been that for his whole life, beginning as an undocumented student in the U.S. for a long time until he received his green card just before joining our program. He talked about coming to social justice counseling from an activist perspective, whereas I came from an academic perspective. Our other co-author talked about coming to social justice from a community perspective. As a Filipino man, he talked about his embeddedness in his community and family which led him advocating with and for his community, but in a culturally different way than I or our other colleague.

Co-Editors: Thanks, Rebecca. You shared with us a very rich background of how social justice and action developed for you. It was interesting to hear you discuss the three different paths that led to you and your co-authors getting involved in social justice. It was surprising that you said academics, because at the beginning of our conversation you mentioned how your Jesuit values were a foundation for your social justice and action interests.

Toporek: Yeah, well, I think that did establish my foundation. But honestly, my parents didn't really engage visibly in community organizing and activism as far as I could tell as a child. Some of the reason, I think, was the feeling that we couldn't be politically active because we weren't citizens. But I think it also had to do with so many other things like economics, mental health issues, and other family issues.

It wasn't until I was in my community college job with mentors and role models, then my doctoral program where I had faculty and professors who were more active social justice role models. I also had other professors that said

things like advocacy and social action had no place in counseling and counseling psychology which motivated me even more.

Co-Editors: Let's go back a little bit to some of your early life experiences. Can you please share a few more concrete social justice experiences? For instance, before you started your undergraduate education. At that time, were you involved in any kind of social action or social justice?

Toporek: Nope.

Co-Editors: Okay.

Toporek: Well, let me think some more. No, not really. I was a struggling teenager to be very honest, and I experienced depression along with existential crises. My family was involved in community service with elder and developmentally disabled youth through the church. My family also included a lot of international university students in our family celebrations. But, in general, I was not really involved in social action when I was a teenager. However, I clearly remember a moment during one my experiences of depression, I was maybe 14, when I felt like I needed to have a purpose in order to keep going. I needed to know that I was here for some reason, I needed a purpose to keep living. I decided that the reason I was alive was to make things better.

Co-Editors: For other people?

Toporek: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Co-Editors: Okay.

Toporek: And that was the only thing really to hold on to. It's funny because I've told this story a lot, but for some reason today I'm getting choked up.

Co-Editors: Thanks a lot for sharing these experiences. We have a lot of questions for you, but while listening to your story I wondered if there was any specific moment in life in which you said to yourself yeah, I can make things better. Maybe it was an event or something that made you mad and led you to think "I can do this for me or for the people around me." This is a turning point in life. I think without that one moment we will continue being on the surface. If you have that moment like I feel you did, this seemed to become a moving force for you. This is my personal interpretation. Please tell me if I'm wrong or right.

Toporek: Yeah, I know. When reflecting on your question, I sort of fell into the trap of thinking that I didn't have a big "aha" or turning point because it seems like social action needs to be some big thing. People often think that if they're not doing some big thing like being in a protest, or being in some kind of organized activity, then they're not doing social justice. Of course, I don't believe that now but it's easy to fall into that trap. But as you were talking, I recall small things that happened through my childhood that I can say, oh, yeah, that was significant for me. I think it was a lot of small things that built up throughout my life. For example, I remember, I must have been 6 years old or so, standing with a friend on the corner where I lived in a predominantly white community. A Black child rode by on their bicycle, and my friend said, "Oh, my dad calls them chocolate drops." I felt really uncomfortable and said, "that's not very nice." Her response was "No, it's good because it's candy," and I replied, "no, that's not good. I don't think that's right." I didn't have the words, but I knew it didn't feel right. There were different times throughout my childhood and adolescence when I did certain things, but I wouldn't have considered them to be social actions. I guess another example could also be related to a sense of justice. In my elementary school, the girls played this game "war," and I didn't want to play this game, but I had to choose

sides. In this game, everyone was supposed to take sides and then you were supposed to go spy on the other side. I didn't want to do any of that. I was trying to explain the dilemma to my parents, and this is how helpful they were, "Well, tell them you're like Switzerland, and you're a neutral country." I remember feeling like they didn't understand adolescent girls at all and that was not going to work. I remember struggling a lot with that throughout my childhood, not feeling like there was a place, or a way or an avenue other than to raise questions and say, that doesn't feel right. I think I didn't have enough confidence in myself for a lot of reasons, to be visible and to take action other than doing small things. When I decided that my purpose was to make the world better, I didn't really have a clear plan of what that would mean, or the skills and confidence to do it. Like I said before, the peace rallies my family attended when I was a child made an impression on me and my parents were involved in some other protests like the grape and lettuce boycotts. They were also involved in the artist community. When I was little, my family had friends that were musicians and puppeteers. A lot of the music and puppet shows had themes of inclusion, fairness, difference, peace, and other values. My mom was an artist and a potter, loved the music of Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Woody and Arlo Guthrie. My dad was an architect and was very interested in spirituality. He also experienced bipolar episodes throughout my life and so my family experienced the problems of the mental health system over and over again. As far as being involved in social justice action in high school, I think I was just trying to make it through. I don't even know if my high school had a club or a group, or organization focused on justice issues. So, I'm a late late bloomer, I guess you can say!

Co-Editors: Yeah, late bloomer, in terms of how you label it. However, having a social action philosophy you can trace to a much earlier time in your life though calling it that is something you did not do.

Toporek: Yeah.

Co-Editors: So, we want to make sure we heard you correctly? At one point you said that your graduate programs really didn't promote social justice kind of work and but at another point you shared that you had some professors that were sort of role models. Maybe we didn't hear you correctly.

Toporek: It was different between my master's program and my doctorate ten years later. I did my master's program in the late eighties. It was much more of a traditional counseling training program. But it was in Eugene, Oregon, which is a little bit of a counterculture community. The program provided basic skills, training, and working in the community. We did have alternative readings and faculty involved in the community in various ways. Eugene had alternatives to policing but there weren't faculty that were leaders in social justice or at least I wasn't aware of it. My thesis was focused on counselor burnout and I'm finding that helpful now as I look at activist burnout. For my doctoral program, I specifically chose the program because there were faculty who were doing amazing things to change the profession.

Co-Editors: Were there other people in or outside the profession that you viewed as social action role models?

Toporek: Yes. In the community college where I worked after completing my master's, I had mentors and role models who were counselors and also involved in ethnic studies movements. I also got involved in the American Counseling Association, or ACA, as a counselor in the early nineties. The reason I went to my first ACA Conference was because I had attended a California Multicultural Counseling and Development all day training that Derald Wing Sue, Patricia Arredondo, Thomas Parham, Michael D'Andrea, Don C. Locke, and Allen Ivey presented about the multicultural competencies. That was in 1991 or 1992. I was so inspired listening to them and really committed to what I felt was needed in the profession. I was frustrated that multicultural counseling wasn't taught in my master's program, and I believed that this movement would change things for the better. At that training, the presenters invited people to attend the ACA Conference and advocate for the multicultural

competencies. I attended the next ACA conference. I joined AMCD (the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development) and within a year or two volunteered to work on a task force with Patricia Arredondo. I think it's important to say that I was very committed to AMCD, it was my home within ACA. But it was complicated because I was one of the few white members who were involved. I wasn't always sure how to be helpful without overstepping or whether I should be visible. I found a lot of wonderful colleagues and mentors in AMCD, and at the same time, there were some folks who were not as comfortable with my involvement. I worked a lot on cultural humility throughout that experience.

At the same time, Derald Wing Sue was living in the Bay Area, teaching at Cal State Hayward. My community college colleagues and I were able to get a small institutional grant to invite him to do a training series for our department about multicultural competence in counseling. I learned so much through my relationships with Derald and Patricia, and then later Thomas Parham and the whole group who had presented the original workshop. They were a very cohesive team and had founded an organization, the National Institute of Multicultural Counseling (I think that's what it was called). The purpose was to provide training and advocate for multicultural competence. Additionally, they worked to advocate for ACA to adopt the multicultural counseling competencies so that counselors would receive better training. I had the fortune of being able to watch and learn from them about the process of advocating for this kind of institutional change. This was the second decade they had been trying to get ACA to adopt the competencies. I was able to sit in on some of the planning meetings, talking about what would be needed for institutional change. The "Call to the Profession" that introduced the idea of multicultural competence was published 1982 by Derald and a large group of colleagues, and a follow up article was published in 1992. However, ACA did not adopt the competencies and argued that they were not specific enough. As a result, Patricia led a task force in AMCD to operationalize the competencies and I volunteered for that group. One thing that I learned from this process, and I tell my students now, is that if you volunteer for a committee or a task force, and you actually do the work, then you are making a contribution. With the opportunity to work on the operationalizing the competencies task force, I was able to work more closely with Patricia, and that laid the groundwork for work I did later.

In my role in the community college, I began to increasingly feel like I wasn't able to do as much as I wanted to impact the profession or even my department and college. I started to think that doctoral programs would be a better next step. I had always planned to do a doctoral program, but that realization sort of convinced me to do it. After several years of applying, I was accepted and chose to attend the University of Maryland given the big impact Janet Helms's and Don Pope Davis's work had on me. I learned a lot about scholarship, research and leadership from both of them, each in different ways. There was also a lot to learn from the other students who worked on their research teams as well.

Co-Editors: We didn't know some of the stories you shared. It's really interesting to hear them and to hear how the group of people you mentioned approached getting the competencies approved by ACA.

Toporek: Yeah, it was really powerful.

Co-Editors: Yes, very powerful. Let's shift a bit. You've done a lot over the years related to social justice and action. Give us some snippets of some different projects, so that we can better understand the diversity of your work.

Toporek: There's one thing that has come up a few times. It is not a project, but it was an important experience. Many of my students are sort of asking and trying to figure out how to move forward. Given the political climate we are in, I'm starting a new project exploring the backlash that people are experiencing for doing their social justice work. The student who's working with me on it and I were talking about what backlash looks like. I'm going

to tell this story very briefly, and then I'll answer what I think you might be asking, which is intentional projects as opposed to unintentional. When I was at the community college, we were observing over time that there were students of color, students with disabilities, and female students who were involved in student government, and then leaving student government due to a hostile environment. After several years of encouraging students in this situation to follow due process and to talk with the Dean, it just seemed to keep happening. A group of us across campus came together and said, we need to do something different, because this was not working. In our meeting, we realized that there were other things happening across campus. For example, several students had reported that an instructor listed names on the board and said that all the students listed there would need to retake the exam. The list was made up of all Vietnamese names and the instructor thought they had cheated and was requiring them to retake the exam. We were appalled and agreed that this was not right. Then, an incident happened on campus that was the catalyst for deciding on action. There was an altercation between the student government president, a young Black man, and a white female student senator who had said she felt unsafe with him. The campus had ordered him to stay away when she was on campus. He came to campus to get his things, and campus police ended up throwing him to the ground and arresting him. My colleagues and I felt like there must be serious questions about what was going on in Student Government for it to escalate to this. We questioned what the Student Government Advisor had done over the past several years to address issues that seemed to keep building. We were frustrated that it seemed that the college had not resolved what seemed to be long standing issues and decided that someone needed to bring this situation to the attention of the Academic Senate. We decided to write a confidential memo to the Academic Senate, saying that the process and leadership of student government needed to be examined for climate issues and hostile environment. We had 12 or 13 points in our letter, one of them was to examine the role and function of the Student Council Advisor in relation to addressing hostile environment. Soon after the meeting with the Academic Senate, the Student Government Advisor filed a ten million dollar lawsuit against us and a separate suit against the college. The college was unhappy that we took this action, saying that once he put the suit in place, this prevented them from addressing the issue. They didn't want to provide legal support for us. However, we were able to point to the part of the ACA Code of Ethics to show that we had an ethical responsibility to bring issues of discrimination to the attention of our employer, that this was within the scope of our duty as counselors. As a result, the college did provide legal counsel for us. Additionally, the NAACP and the ACLU provided support and consultation. The person who brought the lawsuit then added both organizations to the lawsuit. I learned a lot from what ended up being a six year lawsuit. It's been a really important part of my development. Although it was emotionally and professionally difficult, I was able to go through it as a part of collective action and learn about consequences. We could have taken a different action, but it helped me to see a process and understand how the legal system ends up getting involved for better or worse. In our case, it was kind of worse, and I realized how much inequity there is in the legal system. This added to the groundwork for my interest in developing tools to help counselors understand how to navigate social justice in their work. In my counseling positions prior to that point, I had learned by the seat of my pants how to advocate for individual clients. But I hadn't really learned about how to do systems level action around specific issues. Prior to the lawsuit, one of my colleagues and I had already been talking about the need for institutional cultural competence. We wanted to expand on the Sue, Arredondo and McDavis multicultural counseling competencies to include an institutional competence aspect. That project was my first academic social action writing, and it took a long time. Being a community college counselor is a really hard, intensive job that doesn't leave space for any academic sort of writing. That's in part also why I was committed to do a doctoral program. I knew I couldn't continue having a full-time job that was a hundred percent service and be able to do and produce things that were going to be useful beyond my immediate environment.

Once I started in my doctoral program, there were a number of things I was able to do related to multicultural training and advocacy. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Loretta Bradley, Jane Goodman, Beverly O'Bryant, and

Judy Lewis were all presidents of ACA and all focused on different aspects of advocacy and social justice. In the late 1990s, I submitted a proposal to do a roundtable at the ACA Conference on counselor advocacy, and it was accepted. As a result, I met Judy and other folks. Jane wanted to put together a task force to develop the advocacy competencies and appointed Judy Lewis as the chair, with Mary Smith Arnold and Reese House as additional members. They invited me also to be a part of that task force as well. At the same time, others were talking about the need for divisions to focus on different aspects of oppression, for example, forming a group within AMCD to support lesbian, gay and bisexual member. There were some members who were very committed to anti-racism work and also were gay or supporting folks who were taking action around gay rights were not feeling comfortable in AMCD. Similarly, there were people who were in what was AGLBIC (Association for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Issues in Counseling) (later known as SAIGE) who talked about feeling support around sexual orientation but not addressing racism. There was talk across divisions about the need to have more of an umbrella group that focused on collaboration and social justice more broadly and where we could address oppression. Although they didn't use the language, it was really intersectionality that they were talking about. Leaders such as Patricia Arredondo, Judy Lewis, Jane Goodman, Mark Pope, Beverly O'Bryant, Michael D'Andrea and others set up a 2-day meeting at ACA headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. Because I was in school at Maryland (just a 30 minute drive from Alexandria), I was able to be a part of the process. At the meeting we talked about how and what sort of action we should take, and could we integrate social justice and advocacy more into ACA as an organization. As part of that conversation, we decided it should be more than an interest group and that it should be a division. Because Mark Pope, Judy, Patricia, and Beverly, for example, had been ACA presidents, within the 1st day, we wrote bylaws, a necessary first step to proposing a new division that would be called Counselors for Social Justice. In fact, everything that needed to happen occurred in a day and a half. It's the only meeting I've ever been involved in where we ended early because all the work was done. We didn't even have to do the second half of the second day, because it was like boom! Boom! Boom! This experience was really helpful to me, seeing how to make change within an organization. A lot of it had to do with having the right people in the right places who knew the processes and roadmap, how to maneuver what was necessary. Being involved in the creation of the Advocacy Competencies allowed me to think about the ways that the multicultural counseling and advocacy competencies come together. And then, as you know, Larry, co-editing the *Handbook for Social justice in Counseling* was the next thing for me. It came out of a discussion in More PIE (an informal group within the Society of Counseling Psychology focused on cross interest dialogue). We facilitated a roundtable presentation at APA where we had folks talk about the social justice work they were doing. We thought people needed concrete examples of social justice as psychologists. There were so many people doing really good work, but it wasn't really written up anywhere. And you, Gargi Roysircar, Nadya Fouad, Tania Israel, and I did the roundtable and then decided to create and serve as Co-Editors of the Handbook.

Co-Editors: Yep.

Toporek: I'm coming closer to today. There are a lot of different smaller projects that I've been involved in. The amazing opportunity I had in 2007 to work with Tod Sloan as co-founders and co-editors of the *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology* taught me so much. As you know, Tod and I worked together for more than ten years on the journal (I'll talk more about that later). Aside from editing the journal, I was also trying to think about what was next after the *Handbook for Social Justice* was out for a while. I had been asking around to decide if we should try to do another book. I asked people (counselors and psychologists I knew) what would they want to see. What would be useful? And of the people that I talked to most said they needed something for their students that would guide them about how to do social justice work. Unless they're already community organizers, or they're already doing that work, a lot of folks were just kind of uncertain and afraid to do the work. They didn't know what to do or how to do it.

Around the same time, I was invited by the Panhellenic Counseling Association to give a keynote talk because of our Handbook. A Greek psychologist had translated the *Handbook for Social Justice in Counseling Psychology* into Greek. As I began preparing for that presentation, I was thinking what possibly could I have to say that's relevant to folks in Greece? Because the U.S. context is so specific in my mind, and there's so much that's happening in Greece that I don't have expertise about, I was concerned about whether I could be culturally relevant. I reflected back on what I had learned from our process of writing the Handbook and reading all of the amazing work written by the folks that contributed to our book, and also my own experience. I ended up realizing that what I had learned falls into four areas. One was assessing and knowing your strengths, knowing what you know, and taking action based on that now, as opposed to saying, oh, well, I can't do social action until I know how to do XY, or Z. Instead, start now with the skills and resources you have already. And then developing solidarity is the second area, focusing on making sure that the social justice work you are doing is aligned with the communities most affected. For some of us, we are doing work from a privileged place. For me, that is being employed in higher education and being white. Also, I live in a heterosexual relationship, you know all of these different aspects of privilege? So, solidarity and taking the lead from communities that are impacted is essential. And then strategy is the third area. Often, people jump to strategy or action first, you know, go protest or don't take action at all. Or they think, "I'm going to do this," but they haven't really laid the groundwork yet. Strengths and Solidarity lays the groundwork then Strategy is really about the how and the nuts and bolts of taking action. Then sustainability is the fourth area. How do we not burn out? How do we maintain these relationships? How do we deal with the consequences that come from the work that we're doing. Two days after I gave that presentation, the 2016 U.S. election happened. I was still in Greece and I was receiving distressed emails from my students who were distraught about the election results, feeling hopeless, some feeling disconnected from their families who had voted for the candidate that my students believed had done and would do so much damage. It was a time of feeling overwhelmed and somewhat paralyzed. The presentation in Greece was very well received and I started to realize that this could be a useful framework for a workbook to help shift away from paralysis and keep moving toward action. So, I invited my very good friend, Dr. Muninder Ahluwalia, who is a fierce, brilliant social justice oriented psychologist and counselor educator who does social justice work in such a different way from me. I suggested that we do a workbook that people could actually work through. While we were working on the book, we also began a video project where we interviewed 13 counselors and psychologists who we knew were engaged in advocacy and activism and talked to them about what they did, how they did it, and what recommendations they had. This video was produced by Alexander Street Press and is still available. The folks we interviewed were amazing and helped shape some ideas for the workbook, especially the version that is coming out now focused on counselors, psychologists and other helping professionals. But I'm getting ahead of myself. We designed the first workbook for the general public to encourage people to take action. The workbook would lead them through different aspects of social action, engage them in activities, then they would develop a social action plan. We organized the workbook around those four pillars or areas of reflection. The book came out in 2020, just as everything shut down for COVID and George Floyd was murdered. A lot of the work we had planned to do to engage people around the book was difficult and there were a lot of other things going on in the midst of trying to figure out how to live and work remotely. That summer, Academics 4 Black Lives created the first of several annual intensive online institutes focused on anti-Black racism and, as a part of that, they provided structure for accountability groups. I was fortunate to participate and connect with six other women who were committed to understanding white supremacy and we began meeting weekly, then biweekly for the next three years. Earlier, probably about 2016, I had also become more involved in protests and marches and was spending time learning about, and participating in, bystander training. Once things shut down due to COVID, that changed to car caravan protesting, mostly about police violence. Later in 2020, multiple family crises happened, my caregiving responsibilities increased for my mom with Alzheimer's, multiple family members were diagnosed with cancer, etc. I was trying to balance that with also being department chair as well, all while figuring out how to provide our program remotely for the first couple of years of shutdown. One of the

principles in the sustainability pillar is that sometimes it's okay to step back. And that's sort of what I did, or rather, I shifted my attention to family and my department. As department chair, I wanted to make sure we were there for our students. George Floyd was murdered after my first year in the role and I wanted to make sure we explicitly looked at how anti-black racism and white supremacy may be implicit in the work we do in higher education and in counselor education, including our department. What are the things that we can do to be consciously aware of that and deal with that and change our curriculum? How can we look at decolonizing our curriculum? In terms of writing and professional activities, I stepped back quite a bit for a couple of years. My colleague, Muninder, and I had always intended to write a different version of the *Taking Action* workbook specifically oriented for counselors and psychologists so in 2021 or 2022, I don't remember exactly, we invited two other colleagues to join us. It took a lot longer to finish given all of life's unexpected circumstances, but we just sent it off to the publisher a couple of months ago, so that feels good.

Co-Editors: That's great what you have shared. Because you've had your foot in both the counseling and psychology professions, can you share with us how they have evolved in terms of social justice and social action, and where you think they're heading.

Toporek: Yeah, it's interesting. If you had asked me this two months ago, I might have had a very different answer. And I'll explain that in a minute. I feel like there has been a lot of good movement in some ways. Being in the profession as long as we have, we've had the opportunity to see a lot of different things happen. For example, the resistance to even considering and adopting multicultural counseling competencies took two decades, as it first came out in 1982. It wasn't adopted by ACA until 2002 and then the same year that they adopted those competencies they adopted the Advocacy Competencies. Within ACA, there are several divisions that I am most familiar with that have carried social justice. AMCD was groundbreaking, having started as the Association for Non-White Concerns in Personnel and Guidance (ANWC) in 1972. They held ACA accountable in various ways across the years and fostered important leadership and support for members of color. Counselors for Social Justice, as I mentioned earlier, does some amazing work engaging people in social action. And, SAIGE, the Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive Identities (formerly ALGBTC) continues to do really important advocacy. I know the Association for Specialists in Group Work also has been committed in terms of social justice. But, as an organization, ACA has fluctuated a lot. The Code of Ethics has recognized advocacy and social justice but there was a period, I think it was in the 1990s, when ACA basically said that they wouldn't take any political or human rights stances. They wouldn't do any statements about current events or anything. There was a human rights committee that ended up getting disbanded and after a lot of advocacy, it was finally reinstituted. Judy Daniels and Michael Hutchins did some great advocacy there. I feel there have been ebbs and flows within both counseling and psychology.

In APA, I was a Division 45 (*Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity and Race)* kid. My mentors were in 45 and 45 was much more explicit about social change. That's where I felt more comfortable. In the early 2000's I was able to run for and serve on the Division 45 Executive Council. I learned so much from my colleagues there who were from different specializations across psychology. That broadened my understanding and also gave me great exposure to all the work folks were doing around serving culturally specific communities and doing culturally and racially focused research. Part of my position also was to solicit and advocate for our members to serve on APA Boards and Committees, so I learned a lot about the complicated ways that access to leadership within large organization works or doesn't work. I was very aware as well of the complexities of my role as a white person in the organization.

In APA Division 17, I honestly didn't participate until maybe 20 years ago because it felt, to me, to be resistant to multiculturalism and social justice. When we did our Handbook, I started to get more invested. Some of the

people who had been very prominent in Division 17 in the 1990s and earlier were also faculty in my doctoral program and were not supportive of social justice approaches. For example, one of the faculty in my program told me directly that advocacy is what social workers do, not counseling psychologists. Another faculty member told me that I was having a hard time embracing a counseling psychology identity and was too focused on counseling and advocacy. So, early on, I didn't feel like Division 17 had anything for me. Then, as more folks became involved in leadership and started integrating social action, that's when I started to come back. To be honest, meeting and working with you, Larry, Nadya, Gargi, and Tania on the Handbook was a great relief because it affirmed that there were prominent people in the field who believed in social justice. That's when I started to have hope for the division. Since then, I feel like there are a lot of good things and that Division 17 is moving in a promising direction. For example, the linking to structural competencies now is a great direction. There's so much great stuff that Helen Neville and Amy Reynolds have done along with Shavonne Moore Loban, Anneliese Singh, and Melanie Wilcox as well as others. Working with Tod Sloan beginning in the early 2000s, I got to know the divisions of peace psychology, community psychology, and outside APA, Psychologists for Social Responsibility. That was helpful, because I had pretty much figured that there was nothing else in APA that was going to be supportive. I'm not sure what to expect from APA as a larger organization. Over the last couple of years and especially right now, what I foresee is that we will be in a period of challenge where the organization and some members will have a louder voice moving toward a more conservative stance. I think that in APA and ACA there will be professionals that feel like they've been marginalized because they have conservative views. I am afraid that they will work toward imposing and participating in oppressive legislation at the state level and national. And that they will try to roll back the content about advocacy that is in our code of ethics and accreditation standards. I think that there are a lot of challenges coming. I didn't expect this, and I think there's going to be a lot of feeling like we are moving "three steps back to go one step forward." In some ways, I think it will be very clear as to what needs to be done. That's a good thing. But in other ways it's disappointing, because I think a lot of the progress that has been made, and a lot of people who have been willing to trust being a part of the profession and the organizations may be targeted. The project that I'm starting now, well, it's an expansion of something Amy Reynolds and I did for several years at the APA Convention. We facilitated roundtables and panels of folks that have been targeted because of the work that they're doing around social justice. In part, I was motivated to do this because of harassment I received from an interview I did during COVID with the New Normal, a video series from the Washington Post. They interviewed me for an episode focused on whiteness and white racial identity. It ended up being picked up by conservative media, and I received threats, pornographic and racially violent messaging, and harassment through social media, mail and phone calls to my office, and our office staff. It highlighted for me how many of our colleagues, especially professionals of color, are targeted much more persistently and violently than I was targeted. Now that I am no longer department chair and can get back to research, I'm launching a quantitative study to have something more concrete to look at. What kind of backlash are people experiencing? What has been helpful to them? What are the resources that they turn to? What do they think the profession ought to do to support its members who are doing work around social justice? I think a lot more backlash is coming. When I began working with Amy on all this, I think she was president of APA Division 17. Part of what we were talking about as a project was how can and should Division 17 support its members that are experiencing backlash? We talked about institutional aspects of the backlash. For my research, I want to hear from as many people as possible who are experiencing it, and how they address it. And where do they find support? Have they talked about it at all? Or do they just try to push it aside? What do they recommend for early professionals or others who are engaging in human rights and social justice work? My research collaborator, a student, and I are working on developing a toolkit to help, because I feel it is going to increase even more.

Co-Editors: Agree, it will increase even more.

Toporek: This morning I attended a webinar about creating proposals for NCORE, the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in higher education. Two questions I thought were really interesting that it didn't even occur to me to ask gave me a sense of what I think we might be in for given the political climate. One participant asked something like, "Is it still okay to name outright in proposals white supremacy, colonization, things like that? Or should we no longer be using that language?" Fortunately, the conference organizers said, "Well, we're still using that language, and we're going to. And we probably are going to have to start thinking creatively about how to continue doing the work that we're doing." The other question was about the conference being in New York. "What security measures is the conference going to take for participants given the political climate? And given that Trump has a residence in New York, what is the Conference expecting? And how are they going to keep people safe?" And I realized that I didn't even think about these issues. Oh, yeah. I think those are the kind of things that, as professions, I agree with you there is a lot of rhetoric. I also don't know in the next 4 years whether we're going to be able to move forward from where we are or whether we're going to just try to make sure people are safe.

Last night I participated in a day of remembrance for transgender folks. That was really moving, because part of it was reading off the 431 names of trans people, and how they died over the past year, most had been murdered, some killed by suicide. Just being aware of how many people will be in danger, the people who already are in danger, and those who may be increasingly in danger is critical. I imagine with all the international work you both do that's something you've seen and been in the midst of intensively more so than I. I think that for a lot of us who do more of our work in the U.S., we can learn a lot from the experiences that both of you have had.

Co-Editors: Yeah, yeah, it's interesting that you pointed these different safety issues, Rebecca. I have a colleague that is afraid to cross the border into the neighboring state because of safety. Like you said, there are many more people experiencing this fear. People doing research on topics considered taboo now are being targeted as are universities that support this research. Scholars though are thinking whether it is safe to continue their research. State legislators are trying to stop and silence that research.

Toporek: Yeah. My department chair has been instrumental in getting large HRSA grants for us. These are federal grants that provide stipends to students for integrated behavioral health training. Our grants have been equity focused. And that's part of why we've been able to secure the grants. We're applying for these grants again and we're not sure whether these grants will be funded again. I don't know if anything can be done about this.

Co-Editors: Yeah, very challenging, scary, and troubling situations and times.

Toporek: I appreciate you sharing this with me because it also makes me think about where we are in the process of developing our survey and research. I also think what you're pointing out is not only that there are people who have experienced backlash, but there are also people who are sort of rethinking and changing their work because they fear the backlash. It's all about silencing, right? Whether it's that people are silenced or threatened directly, or whether it's thinking about changing. What the perpetuators do accomplishes the goal of silencing people.

Co-Editors: Yes indeed! Let's try to wrap up the interview. We can talk forever! Silencing we think can be reframed as epistemic injustice. Accepting the global responsibility to face all these challenges is not easy. You mentioned, you felt when you were young you were not prepared for the challenges happening today. Our training courses do not offer enough to the new generation. Psychologists everywhere in the world face the global challenges we have discussed.

Toporek: Yes, they do.

Co-Editors: Climate issues change into migration issues. There is a great risk of some parts of this world becoming dominant and continuing to dominate the rest of the world. What would be your advice? For example, taking an action somehow or being ready to take an action?

Toporek: Right, right, individual level or curricular level, and global level.

Co-Editors: Yes! At all the levels. How can we get prepared, how can we prepare our students?

Toporek: Yeah, yeah. yeah, that's a good question. My colleague does a lot more international work than I do. She's from Turkey. And she's spending a lot of time going back and forth between Turkey and here, because her family is still there and so I feel she has much more expertise on a global level than I do. She is doing amazing work. But I think one of the things that can be helpful in terms of the curriculum, and for our students is integrating more into textbooks like the basic textbooks that we have. I say that because I'm using a brand new textbook for lifespan development, that I'm pretty excited about. It's still limited in some ways but I'm excited because it takes sort of a case approach for each part of the lifespan. For example, in the section on the 1st part of the lifespan, it focused on a family that had migrated from Guatemala through Mexico to here, and in the process, it talks about the family and intergenerational trauma. It talks a bit about war and immigration policies. It integrates some of those more systemic level issues into understanding the developmental challenges of this child and his family. I feel that's been a great way to bring it into the class because I'm in a program that's about 60 to probably 65% students of color, about 60% 1st generation students, 75% bilingual. We have a lot of students that are in communities they plan to go back and work in locally that are economically struggling, you know, bilingual, trilingual, quadrilingual. They need to get a job to serve their family, and many of them come also from community organizing backgrounds, which is great, and they bring a lot of expertise. Sometimes there's a tension between learning the skills of counseling and talking on a more theoretical or organizing level. And then some students don't feel they're being trained to do the job that they're trying to get or to pass the licensure exam or things like that. I think having textbooks that integrate that and help faculty beyond those who are intentional about doing it. It then hits a broader span of people who we are educating, because then the instructors learn at the same time the students are learning, right? If the instructors don't intentionally build it in, but the textbook does, then it will help instructors start to build it in, so that's one thing. I've struggled myself thinking about being involved internationally versus locally, or at the same time. Tod Sloan was my co-editor for this journal for the 1st 10 years of the journal's existence. Tod shared something with me that was informative: he talked about doing a lot of work I didn't know about. I didn't know him at all before we started co-editing JSACP, but he had done decades of work in Latin America and worked with Ignacio Martín-Baró doing a lot of liberatory work. One time I attended a talk he was giving to a militant anthropologists group at a private university here in the Bay area. One of the questions from an audience member was, "I see that you used to do a lot of work in Latin America, but you haven't been doing that for a while, and why is that and what's happened?" He shared that he was talking with some colleagues and some folks there, and asked them, "What do you really need? How can I be most helpful?" And they said, "What we really need you to do is to be in the United States dealing with the issues there that are impacting us here" so, the imperialism, all of the things that that were really impacting them. They said, "You know, it's great to have you here, but we really need you there." When he shared that, I recognized that I had always felt I should be off someplace else doing some grand work. But I live in San Francisco that has a huge amount of poverty and disparity. Substance use is also a huge problem. And so, I ought to be doing that, and where I can be involved locally. Looking at legislation and thinking about divestment, both at our university level and in our state. How things that our state does impact everything globally. The other thing is integrating global perspectives. I was fortunate to develop an undergraduate course focused on career decisions, work and critical thinking. Several years ago, our university didn't have any career exploration classes at all, and it had decimated the career center. I

was thinking, "What can I do? I'm not in student services. What can I do to help?" So decided to develop a course that was a general education course on career exploration. But it's focused on global perspectives, social justice, and anti-racism within an ecological model. Having people think about their career direction with those different pieces of it. That's been interesting and helpful to think about how to address social justice in all the different things that we do. How can we try to integrate that knowledge and understanding to the impact the policies here have on communities, internationally, as opposed to going and doing work, say, in an international community, bringing the "us" perspective there, and not being aware of how the problems were actually probably created by the U.S. to begin with.

Co-Editors: Yeah. Yeah. To wrap up, Rebecca, when you and Tod founded this journal in 2007, did you think that 18 years later the journal would still be published?

Toporek: I hoped so. It was one of those things where I was at a conference social, and I was tired and Judy Daniels came up and said, "Hey, we're going to start a journal for Counselors for Social Justice." I said, "Oh, that sounds really cool." Her next question was, "do you want to be an editor? You don't have to do it on your own. It will be joint project between Psychologists for Social Responsibility." I was really excited about that because I hadn't been involved in that organization. She shared "They already have an editor from their side, Tod Sloan. He's really great. Let me introduce you." So, as Tod and I got started; to be honest, I was just thinking how do we get this up and running? And how do we do it with the principles of it being open access. I wasn't even thinking about the future, except to have an acronym that was easy to say and find and learning all the things about trying to get into databases so that people could access the journal, and making sure it stayed free. Tod and I were very different in terms of our academic and professional backgrounds. I was raised in a very traditional academic kind of environment, you know, going to the University of Maryland and all that. To work with him and have that community psychology, critical psychology lens we were often trying to find, well, how do we develop this as a journal, that was amazing. He had so much experience, passion, and knew so many people doing great social action work. By the way, thank you both for your work getting the journal into PsycInfo! Tod was less interested the databases; he was frustrated by the things we had to do to get there and felt like that detracted us from the real work. But we also knew, and I also knew, that was the way people were going to find the articles, and also a big benefit to the authors. They needed to have specific databases and citation information to go up for tenure and promotion. It was a social justice act to even get it in there. To answer your question, I never thought about the future of this journal. I just focused on its survival.

Co-Editors: Yeah, that's what it's been. It's been survival.

Toporek: I'm so happy that you're still doing it. It feels wonderful to know that the journal is continuing, and I know how hard it is to do that. The labor of love, for sure!

Co-Editors: Yeah, yeah, yeah. What kind of changes would you like to see in the journal? What would you recommend for the journal?

Toporek: One thing that I've seen that Tod and I had talked about doing but we never got to was integrating multimedia into the journal. The Counseling Psychologist, TCP, is doing those podcasts. I think that does make things more accessible. It takes resources of course to do anything additional but in a fantasy kind of world I think that would be cool to have more opportunities for interactive things. I think the journal needs to continue to focus on research and systems. This is hard to meet. I'm not quite sure what to do with that, because as you probably still see, there's a lot that comes in that is hypothetical or theoretical, and that's not enough. I get that it is important for credibility purposes to have articles that are empirical, but it also leaves out a fair number of people

who are doing important community work and often aren't writing it up because they're doing the important work. Tod and I also thought about maybe doing some things where we partner somebody who does academic writing with somebody who's doing community work and that they can do like interviews with the people doing community work and then write it up. It would be a co-authored piece. It doesn't require the person who's doing the community work to do the academic writing. because that may not be their specialty, and they may not have the time to do that. That could be an avenue that could be nice, because then it really could bring some stuff that's action focused to the journal in a way that is consistent with the journal's mission.

Co-Editors: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Let's assume we get into the Web of Science. Our application has been submitted to be included in their Emerging Sources Citation Index. This is a first step in the Web of Science database. If we continue to be successful publishing two issues a year with empirical articles, we might have some latitude in the future to then publish a few conceptual articles or proposed systemic social justice or action strategies.

Toporek: Yeah. Do the articles right now have to report on quantitative studies? Are you able to publish participatory action research or community based research?

Co-Editors: We can and do publish articles that contain all the methodologies you just mentioned. In fact, most articles we publish are based on qualitative methods and analyses. It is rare for us to publish a quantitative paper. The podcast idea came up when we talked with the previous president of CSJ, but we don't have the resources to do this. To return to something you said earlier, is there research on how we can protect people doing social justice work?

Toporek: We're doing the lit review right now trying to find this literature. I think we're going to have to be creative about the search terms that we use and certainly go outside of counseling and counseling psychology and probably outside of psychology. I don't have hope that there will be very much literature or research that's out there. I'm hoping to get this figured out, submit it to IRB in time to maybe send surveys out in March, and then start to gather as much as we can from probably from ACA and Divisions 17 and 45, and other divisions of applied psychology, send it to their list servs, and then see what we start to find out. Hopefully we will be able to make some recommendations at a systems level on how to support people, even if it's a matter of legal support and identify resources.

Co-Editors: Yeah, right, glad to hear about this vital and timely project.

Toporek: Many of the individuals that we talked to initially weren't necessarily interested in coming together with other people. Many people dealt with it more within their family and their close friends, and maybe colleagues, maybe their therapists. The psychological aspect of being targeted and the lack of safety that comes with that, recognizing how vulnerable and visible you are, and especially because families get threatened can explain why they didn't want to come together with other people. In my case, they started calling my department. I've always been kind of careful about keeping my family separate. People, of course, could find my family now if they really wanted to. Some people that Amy and I talked to were energized by being threatened to take action and others not. I think the strategies that people use are helpful and interesting. I want to be aware that what we create needs to align with what people need. We want to be sure we don't put them in more danger than they experience already.

Co-Editors: There are going to be a greater number of people that are fearful. Hopefully not targeted, but probably targeted as well. Which means that maybe more people will be willing to speak out. Is there anything else you want to share with us?

Toporek: I do want to just leave you with one other piece of wisdom that Tod Sloan left with me. Every fall I would have a crisis about staying true to the journal and the classes I would teach. We were doing systems level work with the journal, but each fall I was preparing to teach students individual counseling skills. I often felt that this was such a contradiction. Tod was always so wise, and he said, "I think part of what we're doing in counseling and therapy is to help people heal enough to be able to participate in the systems change process." I think about that a lot when trying to balance systems level work and the training that we're doing for people to work with individual trauma.

Co-Editors: Thank you very much, Rebecca. You shared so many meaningful stories and experiences, lessons learned, and recommendations. We really appreciate the time we spent together!

Toporek: Thank you. Well, it's been an honor to talk with both of you. I hope what I shared was even close to what you were hoping for.

Co-Editors: Way beyond our expectations! Thanks!

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest in relation to this work.

Rebecca L. Toporek Social Justice Focused Books, Videos, Articles and Book Chapters 2014 to 2024

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