



Research Paper: Collective Psychology: A Critical Corrective to the Dominant Influence and Control Paradigm



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Abstract

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Objective: To critically examine the control-oriented trajectory within social psychology—characterized by covert influence, behavioral nudging, and digital dark patterns—and propose “Collective Psychology” as an ethical, liberatory corrective that re-centers democratic agency.

Methods: A theoretical-critical inquiry was conducted through narrative review and conceptual analysis of peer-reviewed literature, books, and policy reports from 1960 to 2025. Thematic extraction and contrastive mapping were used to synthesize dominant influence paradigms with critical, liberation, and decolonial psychological traditions.

Results: The synthesized framework comprises five interdependent principles: radical transparency, collective agency, structural healing, participatory praxis, and plural solidarity. Two irreducible paradigmatic contrasts emerged: shifting power from domination to collective capacity, and replacing covert manipulation with critical consciousness and influence literacy. These contrasts redefine psychological intervention from individual behavior modification to structural transformation and co-produced knowledge.

Conclusion: Collective Psychology offers a coherent, principle-driven corrective that redirects psychological praxis away from technocratic control toward transparent, democratic solidarity. The framework provides actionable pathways for health policy, civic engagement, participatory research, and curriculum reform, demonstrating strong potential for culturally grounded adaptation.

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1. Introduction

Social psychology has been an ambivalent discipline since its inception. On one hand, it has promised a deeper understanding of human behavior in social contexts; on the other hand, it has consistently operated on the border between consciousness-raising and social control. Kurt Lewin (1946), through his concept of "action research," oriented social psychology toward solving real-world problems and defined it as knowledge in service of democracy and social change. However, this knowledge was quickly appropriated by institutions of power and the market, transforming from a tool of liberation into a technology of domination. Edward Bernays (1947), Freud's nephew and a founder of modern public relations, explicitly spoke of the "engineering of consent" and harnessed crowd psychology to shape public opinion and consumerism. He explained how a "smart, aware minority" could use psychological principles to guide the thoughts and behaviors of the masses in favor of industrial owners and political power. Thus, social psychology not only described the mechanisms of social influence but itself became one of its primary technologies.

It is important to acknowledge that social psychology has never been a monolithic discipline. Alongside its instrumental trajectories, it has consistently hosted critical, emancipatory, and collective-oriented strands that challenge conformity and center democratic participation (e.g., Reicher, 2004; Haslam & Reicher, 2012). However, in recent decades, institutional and policy uptake has increasingly privileged covert influence, behavioral nudging, and digital persuasion

architectures. This article focuses specifically on this dominant control-oriented trajectory and proposes Collective Psychology not as a wholesale replacement of the discipline, but as a critical corrective that foregrounds transparency, collective agency, and structural healing.

This instrumental tendency has continued in more complex and institutionalized forms. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008), introducing the concept of "libertarian paternalism" and proposing "nudges" as low-cost tools to change citizen behavior, effectively directed choice architecture in favor of policymakers. Although they call this approach "libertarian," critics have shown that nudges, relying on unconscious cognitive shortcuts, bypass democratic decision-making and place citizens in a state of "unconscious followership" instead of strengthening public reasoning (Mols et al., 2015). Heidi Hurd (2015) offers a fundamental critique, arguing that libertarian paternalism is inherently contradictory and that nudges constitute an "abuse of government power." Concurrently, Robert Cialdini (2007), in his best-selling book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, compiled six universal principles of influence (e.g., social proof, commitment and consistency, scarcity). Although he acknowledges that these principles "can be turned into weapons of exploitation," marketers, politicians, and digital platform designers have used this toolkit to deceive consumers and voters. In digital spaces, this logic has reached its peak of complexity and influence with the emergence of "dark patterns" (Fagan, 2024). Fagan demonstrates that these patterns exploit

cognitive biases to drive users toward decisions often contrary to their interests. Crucially, even when users become aware of such manipulations, they remain vulnerable (Fagan, 2024).

This situation raises an ethical and political question: Can social psychology break free from the logic of control? And if so, what would its liberatory alternative look like? The answer lies in critical traditions within psychology. Critical psychology, particularly in its German tradition with figures like Klaus Holzkamp (1992), criticizes mainstream psychology for reducing humans to passive, predictable beings and, by internalizing the causes of suffering, shielding unjust social structures from critique. Fox, Prilleltensky, and Austin (2009) argue that critical psychology should be a liberatory knowledge in service of social justice, not a tool for control and conformity. Similarly, community psychology since the 1960s has sought to shift focus from the individual to social contexts, emphasizing values such as empowerment, solidarity, and social justice (Kloos et al., 2012). Isaac Prilleltensky (2008), proposing the concept of "psychopolitical validity," emphasizes that liberatory psychology must intervene both at the individual level (reducing distress) and at the structural level (changing unjust institutions). However, recent critical reviews indicate a deep gap between these theoretical alternatives and practical praxis to directly confront influence and deception techniques (Kivell et al., 2023).

The aim of this article is to fill this gap. By proposing the concept of "Collective Psychology," we seek to provide a theoretical and practical framework that, in contrast to control-oriented social

psychology, is grounded in collective values, transparency, and liberation. This concept emerges from the literature of critical psychology, liberation psychology (especially the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró, 1994, and Paulo Freire, 1970), and recent decolonial currents in psychology, placing "the commons" at the center of psychological praxis. The main research question is: How can Collective Psychology be defined in opposition to deceptive influence techniques, what are its principles of praxis, and what are its applications in policy, education, and civic action? Accordingly, after this introduction, section two presents a critical review of the literature in two axes: Dominant Influence and control Paradigm as a technology of influence and the conceptual roots of the collective. Section three outlines the conceptual framework of Collective Psychology and its five principles, followed by an analysis of two fundamental contrasts: power and consciousness. Section four describes practical applications, and section five discusses implications for national science policy, limitations, and future directions.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Approach

This study is a theoretical-critical inquiry employing a narrative review and conceptual analysis. Unlike empirical studies with testable hypotheses, this research aims to synthesize existing literature across two opposing paradigms — mainstream social influence psychology and critical/collective-oriented traditions — to construct an integrative conceptual framework ("Collective Psychology") and derive actionable principles for liberatory praxis.

2.2. Data Sources and Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across the following electronic databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, PubMed, Magiran, and SID (for Persian sources). The search covered publications from January 1960 to March 2025. The following keyword combinations were used in titles, abstracts, and keywords:

- For mainstream social influence: ("social influence" OR "persuasion" OR "nudge" OR "nudging" OR "dark patterns" OR "manipulation" OR "deception") AND ("social psychology" OR "behavioral economics")
- For critical and collective traditions: ("critical psychology" OR "liberation psychology" OR "community psychology" OR "decolonial psychology" OR "communal selfhood" OR "collective agency" OR "empowerment") AND ("praxis" OR "social justice" OR "solidarity")

Additional hand searching was performed by reviewing reference lists of key retrieved articles and books.

Although the systematic database search was restricted to publications from 1960 onward, seminal works published prior to this date (e.g., [Lewin, 1946](#); [Bernays, 1947](#)) were identified through manual reference screening and backward snowballing and were incorporated into the final synthesis.

2.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (a) directly addressed techniques of social influence, manipulation, nudging, or dark patterns; OR (b) provided theoretical or empirical

foundations for collective/communal concepts in psychology (e.g., collective agency, empowerment, liberation, decolonial approaches); (c) were published in peer-reviewed journals, books, or authoritative institutional reports; (d) written in English or Persian. Exclusion criteria: (a) studies focusing solely on general social psychology topics without relevance to influence or collective praxis; (b) opinion pieces without theoretical or empirical grounding; (c) conference abstracts without full text.

A total of 128 records were screened after duplicate removal. Following full-text assessment, 84 sources were included in the final narrative synthesis.

2.4. Analytical Strategy (Data Analysis)

Given the non-hypothesis-driven nature of this theoretical-critical study, the analysis proceeded through three phases:

2.4.1. Thematic extraction: Both authors independently read the included sources and extracted recurring themes related to (i) mechanisms of influence/manipulation in mainstream social psychology, and (ii) core concepts of the collective in critical, liberation, community, and decolonial psychologies. Initial coding was inductive.

2.4.2. Contrastive mapping: Extracted themes were organized into two paradigmatic poles (mainstream control-oriented vs. critical collective-oriented). Themes that appeared in both literatures were further examined for points of tension or convergence. Two fundamental contrasts emerged inductively from this process: "power as domination vs. power as collective ability" and "covert

influence/deception vs. critical consciousness".

2.4.3. Integrative synthesis: Using narrative synthesis (Popay et al., 2005), the contrastive themes were woven into a unified conceptual framework. The synthesis was guided by the question: What principles would a liberatory psychological praxis require to directly counter manipulation and deception techniques? The resulting five principles (radical transparency, collective agency, structural healing, participatory praxis, plural solidarity) were considered supportive (i.e., valid) if they met three criteria: (a) they had

3. Results

The narrative synthesis and conceptual analysis yielded two main categories of findings: (a) a five-principle framework defining Collective Psychology, and (b) two fundamental paradigmatic contrasts between the dominant paradigm of control-oriented social influence and the proposed Collective Psychology.

3.1. Five Principles of Collective Psychology

From the integration of critical, liberation, community, and decolonial psychologies, five interdependent principles were identified as constitutive of Collective Psychology.

Principle 1: Radical Transparency – In contrast to covert influence techniques (nudges, dark patterns, hidden persuasion) that rely on concealing true goals and exploiting unconscious cognitive shortcuts, Collective Psychology demands full disclosure of all intervention-relevant information: the problem to be addressed, the identity and institutional interests of actors, available options, positive and negative consequences of each option, and

clear grounding in at least two of the critical traditions reviewed; (b) they could be translated into concrete, actionable applications; and (c) they demonstrated internal coherence (i.e., no logical contradiction among principles). No formal hypothesis testing or statistical inference was performed.

The synthesis was conducted collaboratively, with disagreements resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Reflexivity notes were maintained to bracket the authors' theoretical commitments.

existing uncertainties. Community members are not "targets" of intervention but active partners who must be able to decide with open eyes.

Principle 2: Collective Agency – Instead of locating the source of problems in individual weaknesses or deficits, Collective Psychology traces suffering to unequal social, economic, and political structures. Interventions aim to change those structures. The framework adopts a "de-psychologization" of social suffering, helping people recognize themselves not as passive victims or patients in need of treatment, but as collective agents with the capacity to transform structures. This principle aligns with the concept of "communal selfhood" (Lacerda-Vandenborn et al., 2025), where individual mental health is understood as dependent on the health of the collective.

Principle 3: Structural Healing – Beyond mere symptom reduction or temporary relief, Collective Psychology seeks to heal collective wounds through restorative justice, institutional change, and fair redistribution of resources. Structural

healing differs from structural change alone (which may be limited to institutional reshuffling) by emphasizing the mending of historical wounds (e.g., colonization, systematic discrimination) and the rebuilding of collective bonds from within. This principle connects to the trauma and restorative justice literature (Herman, 1992).

Principle 4: Participatory Praxis – Knowledge in Collective Psychology is not produced in university laboratories by experts isolated from communities, but collaboratively with communities present at all stages. This principle draws directly from Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR; Fine & Torre, 2021), where researchers and community members cooperate in all steps: problem identification, data collection, analysis, intervention design, and evaluation. The collective psychologist does not ask "How can I change these people?" but rather "What can we do together"?

Principle 5: Plural Solidarity – Unlike control-oriented influence paradigms that often prioritize conformity and behavioral homogenization, Collective Psychology emphasizes "pluriversal ecologies of knowledges" (Ciófaló & Ortiz-Torres, 2024). This requires a break from "linguistic colonialism" and recognition of multiple languages, cultures, worldviews, and knowledge systems. Solidarity here does not mean assimilation but respectful and active interconnection across differences, extending to the rights of the Earth, ecosystems, and future generations.

3.2. Fundamental Paradigmatic Contrasts

Two irreducible contrasts emerged from the comparative analysis between mainstream social psychology and Collective Psychology.

Contrast A: Power as Domination vs. Power as Collective Ability – In Within the dominant influence paradigm (e.g., Bernays, 1947; Cialdini, 2007; Fagan, 2024), power is conceptualized as power over others: a hidden agent, through secrecy and manipulation, directs another toward a predetermined goal, with the ultimate aim of maintaining or reproducing existing inequalities and privileges. In Collective Psychology, power is reconceptualized as power to (Rappaport, 1987): a dynamic and shared process through which individuals and communities gain greater control over matters affecting their lives. This is the power of liberation praxis (Martín-Baró, 1994; Freire, 1970) and epistemic authority redistribution (Fine & Torre, 2021).

Contrast B: Covert Influence and Deception vs. Critical Consciousness – Control-oriented approaches to influence operate through hidden mechanisms operates through hidden influence and deceptive tactics, relying on unconscious mental shortcuts. Bernays (1947) showed how "consent" could be engineered by appealing to the collective unconscious. Cialdini (2007) acknowledged that the success of his principles depends on their mechanisms remaining hidden. Digital dark patterns obstruct, deceive, and seduce users into unwanted actions (Fagan, 2024). In contrast, Collective Psychology employs critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) defined as "the process by which

individuals and communities identify unjust social, political, and economic structures and take collective action against them." Contemporary expansions identify three dimensions: critical social-political analysis, critical questioning of the status quo, and collective identity for joint action (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). The ultimate goal is cultivating "influence literacy": the ability to detect, analyze, and resist manipulation techniques while acquiring collaborative skills for collective action.

3.3. Distinction from Community Psychology

A distinct finding is that although Community Psychology shares values of empowerment and social justice, it

Table 1

Contrast between the Dominant Influence and control Paradigm and Proposed Collective Psychology Proposed Collective Psychology

Dimension	Dominant Influence and Control Paradigm ¹	Collective Psychology (Critical Approach)
Ultimate goal	Control, predictability, conformity (Cialdini, 2007)	Collective liberation, shared agency, interdependent well-being (Freire, 1970; Martín-Baró, 1994)
Unit of analysis	Individual in the group (as target of influence)	The collective (as agent of change and context of being)
Concept of power	Power as domination and influence over others (Cialdini, 2007)	Power as collective ability to act (Rappaport, 1987)
Characteristic technique	Nudge, dark patterns, covert persuasion (Fagan, 2024)	Critical dialogue, participatory problem-posing, direct action (Freire, 1970; Fine & Torre, 2021)
Role of practitioner	Neutral expert or hidden manipulator (Lehto, 2025)	Accompanier-facilitator (Kivell et al., 2023)
Success criterion	Individual behavior/attitude change according to predetermined plan	Increased collective agency and structural changes based on collective will
Ethical bias	Values of power holders (efficiency, order, persuasion)	Collective values (transparency, solidarity, justice, land rights; Cíofalo & Ortiz-Torres, 2024)
Philosophical roots	Instrumental pragmatism, behavioral engineering, and libertarian paternalism (Hurd, 2015)	Critical theory, liberation praxis, decolonial epistemologies (Fox et al., 2009; Dutta, 2018)
Concept of self	Individual, autonomous self (Lacerda-Vandenborn et al., 2025)	Communal selfhood; identity in connection with others (Lacerda-Vandenborn et al., 2025)

¹ Note: This column refers specifically to the institutionalized, market- and policy-coopted trajectory of influence research, not to the entirety of social psychology, which encompasses diverse critical and progressive traditions.

typically treats "community" as a site for intervention or unit of analysis, whereas Collective Psychology redefines "the collective" not merely as a context but as an epistemic agent and political subject. Community Psychology has also less directly engaged with influence technologies (nudges, dark patterns), whereas a core foundation of Collective Psychology is cultivating influence literacy and collective resistance against organized deception.

3.4. Summary Table

Table 1 presents the eight key dimensions contrasting mainstream social psychology and the proposed Collective Psychology framework.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that mainstream social psychology has systematically functioned as a technology of influence, manipulation, and social control — from Bernays' engineering of consent to contemporary nudges and dark patterns. In contrast, the proposed framework of Collective Psychology offers a coherent, principle-driven alternative grounded in critical, liberation, community, and decolonial traditions. The significance of this shift is not merely technical or methodological; it is fundamentally ethical, political, and epistemological. Collective Psychology does not seek to erase social psychology; rather, it functions as a critical corrective that re-centers the discipline's original democratic and problem-solving commitments while integrating liberation, community, and decolonial insights to directly counter organized deception and covert influence.

First, the contrast between power as domination (power over) and power as collective ability (power to) redefines the very purpose of psychological knowledge. Control-oriented interventions, even when well-intentioned (e.g., nudges for public health), treat citizens as passive targets whose behavior is to be shaped by experts. Collective Psychology, by contrast, views power as a relational and generative capacity that increases when communities gain control over decisions affecting their lives. This reframing aligns psychological practice with democratic values rather than technocratic management.

Second, the contrast between covert influence/deception and critical consciousness challenges the core mechanism of most behavioral interventions. Nudges, dark patterns, and many persuasion techniques rely on keeping their workings hidden; their efficacy depends on the target not noticing the manipulation. Collective Psychology replaces this with the cultivation of critical consciousness — the ability to analyze power relations, detect hidden influence, and act collectively. This shift transforms citizens from vulnerable targets into critical agents. The concept of "influence literacy" emerging from this framework has direct implications for media education, digital literacy, and civic resilience.

The five principles — radical transparency, collective agency, structural healing, participatory praxis, and plural solidarity — are not merely aspirational. They provide concrete design criteria for interventions across settings. For instance, in health policy, replacing hidden nudges with citizen assemblies (as noted in the results) embodies radical transparency and participatory praxis. In psychological research, adopting critical participatory action research rather than conventional experiments operationalizes collective agency and structural healing. In education, teaching influence literacy rather than persuasion techniques enacts plural solidarity and critical consciousness.

A key implication is that Collective Psychology does not reject empirical rigor or evidence-based practice. Rather, it argues that evidence must be generated with communities, not on them, and that effectiveness should be measured by increased collective agency and structural change, not merely individual behavior modification. This redefinition of success criteria has profound consequences for how research is funded, conducted, and evaluated.

Finally, the framework's consonance with traditions of popular solidarity, mutual aid, and collective responsibility — rooted in the lived experiences of working people and anti-colonial

struggles — suggests that Collective Psychology is not a foreign import but resonates with indigenous ethical commitments forged in resistance to exploitation. This opens possibilities for curriculum reform and policy development that are culturally grounded rather than merely imitative of Western models.

In summary, the significance of Collective Psychology lies in its potential to reorient the entire discipline: from a technology of control to a praxis of liberation. The two fundamental contrasts and five principles provide a roadmap for this transformation, though their real-world implementation requires empirical testing and participatory action research — a limitation addressed in the conclusions.

5. Conclusion

This article introduced Collective Psychology as a critical, liberatory corrective to the dominant influence-oriented trajectory in social psychology. The framework is built on five principles — radical transparency, collective agency, structural healing, participatory praxis, and plural solidarity — and stands in opposition to the dominant logic of covert manipulation and power as domination. Two fundamental paradigmatic contrasts were identified: (a) power as domination versus power as collective ability, and (b) covert influence/deception versus critical consciousness. These contrasts are not merely technical but ethical, political, and epistemological, requiring a paradigm shift in how psychological knowledge is produced, taught, and applied.

The main conclusion is that psychology can be practiced otherwise: not as a technology of control and consent engineering, but as a praxis of collective liberation and structural healing. This reorientation has direct implications for health policy (citizen assemblies replacing hidden nudges), civic action (collective critical dialogue against corruption), psychological research (critical participatory action research), and psychology education (influence literacy instead of persuasion techniques). Furthermore, the framework's resonance with values of mutual aid, economic justice, and collective responsibility — as expressed in the historical struggles of the oppressed and the global working class — provides a politically and culturally grounded basis for revising national psychology curricula and science policy away from technocratic control and toward liberatory praxis.

However, this is a conceptual study; empirical and participatory action research is needed to test and refine the framework in real-world settings. Key limitations include the challenge of defining boundaries of “the collective,” the risk of populist co-optation, and the need for indigenous adaptation beyond Latin American and English-language sources. Future research should focus on longitudinal implementation studies, comparative analyses across cultural contexts, and the development of concrete assessment tools for collective agency and structural healing. Despite these limitations, Collective Psychology offers a coherent, actionable, and ethically defensible path forward for a discipline at a crossroads.

Ultimately, this framework is not proposed as a wholesale substitution for social psychology, but as a necessary corrective trajectory that redirects psychological praxis away from technocratic control and toward transparent, collective agency, ensuring that the discipline serves democratic solidarity rather than engineered compliance.

Abbreviations

Define abbreviations that are not standard in this field in a footnote to be placed on the first page of the article. Such abbreviations that are unavoidable in the abstract must be defined at their first mention there, as well as in the endnote. Ensure consistency of abbreviations throughout the article.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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