

## Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Prefigurative Politics"

# Constructing Alternatives: Envisioning a Critical Psychology of Prefigurative Politics

Carlie D. Trott\*<sup>a</sup>

[a] Department of Psychology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA.

### Abstract

Psychological contributions to social movement scholarship have disproportionately concentrated on a "politics of demand", rather than on a "politics of the act", or prefigurative politics. Prefigurative actors, rather than making demands of power-holders, take direct action aimed at creating change in the 'here and now' by constructing alternative modes of being and interacting that reflect a given movement's desired social transformations. Given that the prefigurative process takes place within and between individuals—with aims of changing the macrostructure by altering micro-relations—psychological perspectives are imperative to their understanding. Despite relevant theories and concepts, a psychology of prefiguration has yet to emerge. This theoretical discussion explores several reasons why prefigurative practices have been largely overlooked and at times misunderstood within mainstream social movement scholarship, traces the distinctive dimensions of prefiguration deserving of further (especially psychological) inquiry, and calls for methodological techniques both responsive to the context-driven nature of prefigurative praxis and consistent with the 'bottom-up' approach embodied within these unique spaces of resistance. After highlighting important points of disjuncture and possibility within the study of prefiguration, this discussion offers critical questions and methods aimed to envision and invigorate a critical psychology of prefigurative politics.

**Keywords:** activism, collective action, psychology, prefiguration, prefigurative politics, social movements

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\*Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Colorado State University, 1876 Campus Delivery, Fort Collins, CO, 80523-1876, USA. E-mail: carlie.trott@colostate.edu



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Psychological perspectives within social movement scholarship have disproportionately concentrated on a *politics of demand*, that is, on modes of instrumental collective action characterized by identity- or issue-based groups making demands (e.g., for rights or recognition) of power-holders (Day, 2005). Less attention has been given to movements pursuing alternative routes to social change, including those engaged in a process-oriented *politics of the act*—or prefigurative politics—which take direct action aimed at creating change in the 'here and now' (Dixon, 2014). Prefiguration<sup>1</sup> is simultaneously characterized by a rejection of the "politics of waiting" inherent in reformism (Springer, 2014, p. 1), and by an ethos of "not asking, just doing" (Holloway, 2010, p. 241). Prefigurative action is further guided by the principle that a movement's goals (i.e., the ends) must fundamentally shape the

methods (i.e., the means) it employs. This commitment to means-ends consistency often takes the shape of counter-hegemonic social, political, or economic institutions or projects, or alternative modes of resistance reflective of a movement's desired social transformations (Yates, 2015a). Prefigurative actors pursue social change through "disengagement and reconstruction, rather than by reform or revolution," as a means to gradually build a new and better society 'in the shell of the old' (Day, 2011, p. 108).

Although prefiguration has a long and rich history in social movements, with many encompassing both demands-oriented and prefigurative tendencies, the latter are less often examined in their own right. This is particularly true of psychology's role in social movement scholarship, which despite relevant knowledge and methods (e.g., Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000), remains limited in the study of prefigurative politics. Given that the prefigurative process takes place within and between individuals—with aims of changing the macrostructure by altering micro-relations (Day, 2005)—psychological theories and concepts are imperative to their understanding. This theoretical discussion explores several reasons why prefiguration has been largely overlooked and at times misunderstood in mainstream social movement scholarship, presents distinctive dimensions of prefigurative politics deserving of further (especially psychological) inquiry, and calls for methodological techniques both responsive to the context-driven nature of prefigurative praxis and consistent with the 'bottom-up' approach embodied within these so-called "experiments in living otherwise" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 62).

This exploration begins by examining current understandings and debates around prefiguration in efforts to underscore psychology's strong potential to deepen both. Building on this examination, fundamentally psychological questions about the prefigurative process are posed, which offer diverse and worthwhile directions for future research. Finally, I outline reflexive methodological strategies grounded in prefigurative principles of solidarity and mutual aid, wherein psychologists may benefit—and, as I argue, benefit from—further understanding these unique spaces of resistance. Taken together, this theoretical discussion aims to simultaneously imagine and inspire a critical psychology of prefigurative politics.

## **Prefigurative Politics: History, Terminology, and Features**

Scholars of social movements are presently engaged in efforts to develop and "speak a new language of an emerging constellation of struggle," characterized by a shared political logic of 'negation-and-creation', 'oppose-and-propose', of 'moving-against-and-beyond' (Holloway, 2010, p. 12). Prefiguration has thus taken root as a useful concept, to both refer to, and illuminate, everyday relations, tensions, and priorities within some movement contexts (Yates, 2015a). In the sections that follow, I provide a brief history of prefigurative politics, review terminology and divergent conceptualizations of prefiguration, and discuss common features of prefiguration that expose the rigidities of dominant social movement theories to fully account for prefigurative practices.

### **Prefiguration: A Brief History of 'Present Tense' Politics**

Given the broad characterization of prefiguration as directly implementing, in the present, the desired changes of a group, prefigurative action has been deemed "an ever-present feature of human history" (Springer, 2014, p. 1), prominent in many religious and indigenous practices (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). Within social movements, prefigurative tendencies emerged from opposition to vanguardist interpretations of Marxism, particularly Leninism (Leach, 2013). The critique was that the "means [of struggle] were in tension with the ends, in that hierarchical organization and violence were used to achieve a peaceful, non-hierarchical society" (McCowan, 2009, p. 73).

The resulting pursuit of alternatives was grounded in the notion that a movement's methods should 'prefigure' the values and ideals of the society it wishes to bring into being (Leach, 2013).

Carl Boggs (1978), credited with coining the term, has defined prefiguration as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (p. 2). According to Boggs, three principles guide prefigurative traditions: (1) rejection of hierarchy, (2) disregard for political organizations with rigid and centralized power structures that (re)produce power imbalances, and (3) a "commitment to democratization through local, collective structures that anticipate the future liberated society" (p. 5). As such, prefiguration is closely associated with anarchism, in that common forms of prefigurative praxis are central tenets in anarchist thought (Day, 2005).

Since the 1960s, prefigurative forms have been documented in a variety of movements, including the environmental, peace, student, queer, anti-racist, anti-nuclear, alter-globalization, and indigenous rights movements, among others (Breines, 1989; Dixon, 2014; Mason, 2014). The women's movement is especially notable in this regard, given its emphasis on consensus, coalition-building, and horizontal and egalitarian relationships, as well as viewing the 'personal as the political,' that is, the linking of public and private spheres in citizenship (Epstein, 1991). Although the aforementioned struggles sought to influence dominant social, political, and economic structures (characteristic of demands-based politics), they also pushed for "transformation of the production of everyday life itself" (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 246).

Today, prefigurative tendencies are observed across a range of movement contexts, and together constitute a growing contingent of contemporary movement activity (Day, 2005; Holloway, 2010). Among them, many are united by a shared vision of non-hierarchy, autonomy, inclusivity, and openness (Hardt, 2013; Solnit, 2004). By bringing to life, in the present, the desired elements of a better world, they are also united by an ethos of "getting on with it, here and now" (Holloway, 2010, p. 259).

### **The Medium as the Message: Making Sense of Prefigurative Politics**

A variety of terms have been used to refer to prefigurative forms, including micropolitics, present tense politics, everyday politics, other politics, politics of possibility, politics of dignity, hope movements, and direct action, among others (Dinerstein & Deneulin, 2012; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Graeber, 2009; Holloway, 2010; McCowan, 2009; Springer, 2014; Yates, 2015a). Although prefiguration has emerged as a prevailing term, it must also be distinguished from its other uses. For example, in the work of Margaret Mead, prefiguration refers to the process of older generations learning from younger ones (McCowan, 2009). In psychology, the term has been applied in a variety of contexts, but most often to describe properties of various, primarily apolitical, psychological constructs.

Within social movement scholarship, questions have arisen as to whether prefiguration is most appropriately considered a political orientation, movement strategy, protest method, some combination of these, or an altogether different form of political activity (Graeber, 2013; Leach, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Yates, 2015a). As articulated by Yates (2015a), a common distinction is made between: (1) prefiguration as a *means of doing protest*, and (2) prefiguration as a *project-based construction of alternatives* (e.g., counter-institutions). Prefiguration as a form of protest is best understood as the goal to achieve means-ends consistency in protest politics, whereby protestors embody their political goals (or ends) within their chosen actions (or means). An example of this type of political logic is observed in practices of direct democracy within movements (e.g., Occupy), including the use of consensus in decision-making (Graeber, 2013). A second interpretation of prefiguration is the creation of alternative, counter-

institutions or projects, whereby participants engage in collective experimentation and the construction of new norms that prefigure an ideal society (Anahita, 2009; Leach, 2013). Transition towns are an example of this type of initiative, which locate power and possibility in the local and the everyday by bringing neighbors together through place-based, hands-on projects to build community resiliency (Hardt, 2013).

Understanding prefiguration as “the pursuit of utopian goals ... recursively built into the movement’s operation and organizational style” (Buechler, 2000, p. 207), both interpretations are of course accurate. Divergent conceptualizations of prefigurative politics (e.g., protest vs. project) likely arise from its complexity and variability in practice. However, such diversity is not likely to be captured within dominant (e.g., top-down, ‘one-size-fits-all’) social movement theories.

### **Dominant Social Movement Theories and Prefigurative Politics**

The epistemological zeitgeist in mainstream social movement scholarship has largely prevented a nuanced understanding of prefiguration. Widespread aims to objectively map (i.e., quantitatively model) the mechanisms, dynamics, and processes of movements (e.g., van Stekelenburg, Roggeband, & Klandermans, 2013) have led many scholars to disproportionately focus on a narrow cross-section of movement activity. The most highly-studied movements tend to be those with great visibility (e.g., via public protest), robust organization, and firm objectives allowing for concrete evaluation of movement success or failure (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; Yates, 2015b). Since prefiguration transcends protest, exists partly in private spaces, rejects hierarchy, and avoids state-targeted demands, they may be overlooked or seen as unappealing, given a perception of inadequate organizational or ideological coherence (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014).

Further, social movement scholars have, at times, “disciplined and domesticated social movements by rendering them in terms sensible with respect ... to the scholarly traditions of their field” (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 476). The rigidities of mainstream social movement paradigms are made apparent, for example, when they neglect or misconstrue movement context, targets, or goals in prefiguration (Leach, 2013). The aforementioned conceptual distinction (i.e., between prefiguration as protest vs. project) is useful in this regard.

On one hand, when prefiguration takes place as a mode of protest, conventional indicators of movement success or failure may be assumed to apply. As noted by Haiven and Khasnabish (2014), by solely viewing social movements “through the lens of hegemonic mainstream social movement studies, we see movements as organizations whose principal objective is policy change” (p. 52). Consequently, the potentially multiple non-instrumental, non-institutional effects brought about by such movements may be rendered invisible. For example, under predominant social movement theories, the assumption is easily made that the Occupy movement was a disappointment—despite shifting U.S. public and political discourse on income inequality—in its failure to result in direct policy changes (Graeber, 2013; van Stekelenburg et al., 2013). Making sense of prefiguration thus requires a “different logic” (Springer, 2014, p. 3):

... wherein [action] becomes seen as a conduit not for the contestation of power, but for power’s reclamation. Protest is recast as a rite of passage towards a new consciousness, wherein the idea that we can explore alternatives without seeking permission is both celebrated and actually lived.

On the other hand, when prefigurative politics are engaged—beyond the boundaries of protest—as alternative modes of living and relating in counter-hegemonic projects, they could easily be dismissed as private and apolitic-

ical, or deemed “merely symbolic” or cultural (Day, 2005, p. 69). This theoretical problem has been articulated by Yates (2015a):

In accounts of ‘building alternatives’ there is rarely any distinction made between prefigurative activities and the collective identity processes of countercultures, subcultures or other forms of idealistic or utopian grouping. *Where does the political begin and end in the case of building alternatives?* [emphasis added] (p. 5)

Interrogating the public-private distinction is useful here. For example, following the 2011 evictions of Occupy encampments, returning “home” was commonly viewed as a retreat from the political sphere, despite continued organizing and action (van de Sande, 2015). That is, when collective action takes place beyond the “large public spectacle of protest” (Springer, 2014, p. 3), it is often perceived as losing its political animus.

Exploring a politics of prefiguration requires accounting for actors’ own political perspectives (Yates, 2015a) via a ‘politics of listening’ (Holloway, 2010). In one sense, prefigurative action, sub- and counter-cultural activity are united, as they each encompass the collective assertion of alternatives. In another sense, prefiguration is distinctive in its fundamentally political approach, characterized by an explicit (though flexible) collective vision, with aims of impacting the wider society.<sup>ii</sup>

Adding to its complexity in practice, prefigurative principles have taken root beyond social and political movement contexts, such as in education (Holloway, 2010). As several scholars have noted, education (in both formal and informal contexts) is a key ingredient in the social change process (Amsler, 2014; Freire, 1972; Unger, 1998). Prefiguration in education has been practiced in schools and universities, teacher education, and in community settings (McCowan, 2009). Examples include ‘free’ schools and universities, various forms of participatory democracy in (radical) education, community partnerships, and service-learning. Prefigurative principles are also evident in a variety of other contexts, including in alternative food initiatives (e.g., community gardening, see Counihan & Siniscalchi, 2014), media democratization (e.g., inclusive, egalitarian, and non-commercial media practices, see Kulick, 2014), and community-based conflict resolution (e.g., transformative and restorative justice initiatives, see Zellerer, 2013), among others.

As such, prefigurative modes fall along a number of spatial, temporal, and activities-based dimensions—from spontaneous, short-lived public protests to enduring participatory, life-sustaining projects—each nevertheless drawing contrast with the world which surrounds it (Young & Schwartz, 2012). Such spaces and moments (i.e., always *here* and *now*) share a prefigurative character that “folds protest and process together in an integral embrace” (Springer, 2014, p. 3). Although ‘what constitutes’ prefigurative politics remains contested, drawing lines of continuity or sharpening distinctions is only possible with greater scholarly attention to prefiguration on its own terms.

### Distinctive Dimensions of Prefigurative Praxis

The very nature of prefigurative praxis challenges the logic of conventional social movement paradigms, which elevate ‘objectivity’ and are often retrospective (rather than valuing complexity, with goals of being reflexive), in that prefiguration implies a continual and messy process of daily implementation, internal struggle, and an endless cycle of learning and adaptation (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013). Fielding and Moss (2011) have described this property of prefigurative forms as ‘permanent provisionality,’ in that the struggle for social change is not a horizon event, but rather an ongoing process. As they describe, prefigurative practice “insists that democracy as a way of living in, apprehending and changing the world is *never finished*, but always open to the necessity of critique

and transcendence in our quest for the good society” [emphasis added] (p. 155).<sup>iii</sup> Thus, the dynamic process of prefiguration is improperly assessed if by the same rubric as demands-based social movements.

Given that means-ends consonance implies that strategy and end-goal are one and the same (Breines, 1989), some scholars have suggested that the mere survival of prefigurative forms is an indicator of their efficacy. Further, in light of the prefigurative vision of gradually transforming society by replacing existing institutions, an additional evaluative metric relevant to prefigurative modes is increased participation and/or diffusion of ideas and methods to broader networks (Leach, 2013). However, few researchers have empirically examined this process at the societal level, and some contend that normative categories (i.e., “success” and “failure”) are insufficient in themselves, and must be reimagined to achieve a deeper understanding of the impact and significance of prefiguration (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013). In any case, the most fundamental processes affecting the survival and proliferation of prefigurative modes can be understood as taking place in the minds of, and interactions between, participants and observers. Rethinking prefigurative politics will thus require recognition of these and other unique movement dimensions—a challenge, I think, well-suited to psychological inquiry.

## The Psychological Dimensions of Prefigurative Politics

Given that prefiguration is aimed at the construction of new forms of social organization and relationships, prefigurative processes are profoundly psychological. In the following sections, I advocate for psychology’s increased contribution to the study of prefigurative politics by charting a brief history of psychology’s role in social movement studies, reviewing evidence of psychology’s valuable perspective on diverse topics relevant to prefiguration, and finally by outlining common features of prefiguration in relation to existing psychological theories and concepts.

### Psychology and Social Movement Studies: A Brief Overview

Interest in psychological concepts by scholars of social movements has grown in recent decades (Stryker et al., 2000). However, the turn to psychological theories and concepts is more appropriately considered a re-turn than a new direction in the study of social movements. Prior to the 1960s, dominant theories of social movements were rooted in the social psychology of “collective behavior,” which largely viewed contentious collective action as irrational mob behavior, reactionary in nature rather than reasonable and calculated. During this time, “social movements were taken to be anything but well-considered responses to legitimate concerns about real, but oppositional interests” (Stryker et al., 2000, p. 2). This view ultimately led to social psychology’s so-called ‘fall from grace’ among social movement theorists amidst the eruption of 1960s movement activity (e.g., civil rights, anti-war, black power, feminist, queer). Specifically, such movements’ careful organization, intentionality, and compelling critiques of the unjust status quo (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013) flew in the face of existing psychological explanations.<sup>iv</sup>

Structural theories (e.g., resource mobilization, political process) were erected in place of psychological theories—primarily from the fields of sociology and political science—emphasizing political and structural variables such as economic resources, formal organizations, and political structures and opportunities (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004). Interestingly, although psychological variables (e.g., beliefs, motivations, emotions) were de-emphasized in structural theories, the value-rational actor model of human behavior was applied, which is inherently psychological (Stryker et al., 2000). The implication of this choice was to assume the uniformity of movement participants’ inner-worlds. Critiques of these modes by social movement scholars, drawn in part from symbolic interactionism,

came in the form of cultural theories, which demonstrate greater sensitivity to cultural frames, identities, meanings, and emotions (Gamson, 1992; Klandermans, 1997). Today, growing interest in the complexities of thinking and feeling aspects of political activity (e.g., Gould, 2004) continues to create space for psychological contributions to social movement scholarship. However, psychology's input has disproportionately focused on conventional forms of political action (e.g., instrumental protest politics), and has rarely considered prefigurative practices.

## Psychological Perspectives on Prefigurative Themes

Despite relevant theories and concepts, psychology has yet to fully engage in the study of prefigurative politics. A brief search of relevant terms in the PsycINFO database presently (October, 2015) yields 20 results for “prefiguration,” 24 for “prefigurative,” and 7 for “prefigurative politics.” This contrasts sharply with PsycINFO results for “collective action” (1,827), “activism” (5,696), “political participation” (2,097), and “political action” (2,256)—which, despite their being broader terms, suggests psychology's greater contribution to related topics in social movements and political participation more generally. In this search, the use of “prefigurative” terminology in psychology arises most commonly to describe a property of a psychological construct, as in learning schemas and expectations in decision-making (e.g., Spiro, Feltovich, & Coulson, 1996), rather than in political terms or as the primary focus of inquiry.

At the same time, as the earlier discussion of terminology suggests (see “The Medium as the Message” section above), the “new language” used to describe these alternative movement formations is diverse, and its development and proliferation—like prefiguration itself—is anything but uniform (Holloway, 2010, p. 12). Contrary to search results, psychological research within and beyond social movement scholarship has dealt with themes relevant to prefigurative politics, despite the frequent absence of semantic markers. Thus, exploring the significance of psychological theory and research to the understanding of prefigurative social action requires deeper digging. This section provides selected examples of psychological inquiry into spaces, practices, and constructs relevant to prefiguration.

In the study of social and political movements, a handful of psychological studies have examined prefigurative practices in protest movements, such as Occupy (e.g., Cornish, Montenegro, van Reisen, Zaka, & Sevitt, 2014; Watkins, 2012a), and in counter-institutions, such as ecovillages (Hardt, 2013; Kirby, 2003) and Zapatista autonomous zones (Watkins, 2012b). These recent explorations have offered insights into the personal, ideological, and imaginative dimensions of prefiguration, as well as the social, communal, and practical challenges and rewards of liberatory practice. Moreover, several such studies have generated critical reflections on the conduct of psychological research as well as counseling and community psychology practice, elaborating on themes of shared leadership, consensus, and inclusive dialogue (Cornish et al., 2014; Gordo López & Pujol Tarrés, 2004; Watkins, 2012a). Grounded in prefiguration, the practice of “radical therapy” in humanistic psychology promotes the integration of one's personal and political lives, “through which people can re-create a new society in terms of their own self-images and self-understandings” (Sipe, 1983, p. 20).

As mentioned, the adoption of prefigurative practices has taken root in a variety of contexts, within and beyond contemporary social movements. For example, prefigurative tendencies are inherent within intentional communities, which fall along a continuum of political grounding and vision (Jason & Kobayashi, 1995). In these spaces, the value of a psychological lens is also evident in scholarship lending insights into their unique intra- and interpersonal dimensions, as well as recommendations for their survival and efficacy (Leviatan, 2013; Martin & Fuller, 2004; Olson, Jason, Davidson, & Ferrari, 2009; Sanguinetti, 2014). Additional domains of psychological inquiry with

significance to the study of prefigurative praxis include community organizing (e.g., Christens & Speer, 2015; Orsi, 2014), safe spaces (e.g., Nnawulezi & Sullivan, 2014), civic engagement (e.g., Pancer, 2015), and alternative community-based (e.g., food, education, conflict resolution) initiatives (e.g., Okvat & Zautra, 2011; Shallcross & Robinson, 2008; Wenzel, Okimoto, Feather, & Platow, 2010).

Finally, a number of psychological constructs resonate with themes of prefiguration, despite their development and application in divergent contexts. Examples include explorations of empowerment (Burton & Kagan, 1996), sociopolitical development (Moane, 2010), psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rappaport, 1987), development of critical consciousness (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002), and collective identity formation in social movement and activist contexts (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stryker et al., 2000). In the sections that follow, additional psychological perspectives with perhaps less apparent linkages to the understanding of prefigurative social action are explored.

## Shared Affinities: Expanding the Psychology of Prefiguration

In the present section, I offer a framework for expanding psychology's role in the study of prefiguration, organized into three broad prefigurative processes<sup>v</sup> (see Yates, 2015a): collective experimentation and political meaning-making; creating and consolidating new and future-oriented social norms; and the diffusion and contamination of ideas, messages, and goals to wider networks (p. 1). Below, each process is described in terms of its goals and challenges, as well as its relevance to psychological inquiry.

### Collective Experimentation and Political Meaning-Making

Whether in political mobilization, everyday practices, or collaborative projects, prefiguration involves collective experimentation, informed by the imagining, (re)interpreting, and critiquing of political perspectives (Yates, 2015a). Underlying and animating these elements of prefiguration are psychological processes of individual-level identity work, motivation, cognition, and emotion. Prefigurative forms seek to transform society, but only as an extension of their capacity for personal and collective liberation (McCowan, 2009). The construction of alternatives in prefiguration often involves transformative learning experiences that open up "new dimensions of understanding and perception" (Holloway, 2010, p. 79; McCowan, 2009). According to Fielding and Moss (2011):

Part of the power of prefigurative practice lies in the energising interconnectedness of its way of being, in the lived synergy of holistic commitments ... [which] brings together the structural and interpersonal elements of new ways of working and living ... It requires deep disruption of existing arrangements and dispositions. (p. 156)

Unique challenges may arise, for prefigurative actors, in this space of disruption. Particularly relevant to psychology are the complexities (e.g., self-contradiction) of becoming: How does one make sense of their former and present/future selves in prefiguration? And how do individuals and groups contend with constant and inevitable—though perhaps liberatory—failures (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2013)? Further psychological questions arise in light of prefiguration's emphasis on the '(value-)rational actor.' The affective dimension of prefiguration oscillates between hope and despair, exhilaration and mental fatigue. As Gould (2009) asks, "Does the fact that human behavior is driven by more than human reason pose a challenge to [prefigurative] politics? And if so, in what sense? And if not, why not?" Greater exploration into prefiguration, on the part of psychologists, may begin to address such questions.

Considering that processes of collective experimentation and political meaning-making take place within and between individuals, psychology offers diverse, potentially-instructive theories and concepts. For example, exploring psychological works on intra- and interpersonal dynamics of creativity and self-expression may shed light on the prefigurative themes elaborated here (Antoniotti, Colombo, & Memmert, 2013). Also perhaps relevant is social psychology research on the self and social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Scheibe, 1995), particularly work on self-perception and (collective) identity negotiation and change (Fiske, Gilbert, & Lindzey, 2010; Simon & Klandermans, 2001). A psychology of prefiguration could also potentially draw from the literature on affect and personal strivings (Emmons, 1996), and—in response to Gould (2009)—heuristics, biases, and the fallibility of conscious cognition (Fiske et al., 2010). Finally, given that prefigurative processes challenge traditional modes of (Western) thought and encourage reflexivity, also potentially useful are the psychological concepts of holistic thinking and metacognition in goal pursuit (Achtziger, Martiny, Oettingen, & Gollwitzer, 2012).

### **Creating and Consolidating New and Future-Oriented Social Norms**

From a psychological perspective, prefiguration could easily be characterized as a form of volitional self-intervention aimed at the formulation of, and adherence to, alternative social norms. Prefigurative efforts to ‘be the change’ often involve recognizing and shifting power imbalances within social relationships, and consolidating such norms means translating these codes of conduct into the material and spatial dimensions of everyday life (Ince, 2010; Yates, 2015a). Prefigurative spaces thus represent living laboratories of creative and deliberate social expression—rife with complex individual- and group-level, conscious and non-conscious goals and challenges. Psychology’s potential contributions to their understanding and development are difficult to overstate. For example, what motivates prefigurative social action (e.g., institutional distrust)? And what sustains prefigurative social groups (e.g., interpersonal trust)?

Noted patterns of decline in prefigurative contexts often involve the same processes that make them appealing, including groups’ decentralized structures (e.g., the emergence of an unofficial or vanguard leadership) (Freeman, 1970) and problems with (e.g., the “fetishism of”) consensus-based decision-making (Burdon, 2014, p. 29). A critical psychology of prefiguration may seek to investigate the iterative process of horizontality: For example, how do prefigurative actors grapple, intra- and interpersonally, with this “constant struggle against verticality” (Holloway, 2010, p. 43)?

Here again, potentially useful theories and concepts appear rife in the psychology literature. Making sense of the goals and challenges in the creating and consolidating of prefigurative group norms could benefit from the social psychology literature on group dynamics, cohesiveness, and learning (Forsyth, 2009), not to mention the emergence, changing, and persistence of group norms (Burn, 2006). In terms of group deliberation, consensus process, and conflict resolution, psychological perspectives on collaborative decision-making, interpersonal negotiation, and problem-solving in small groups could be instructive (Fiske et al., 2010; Watson & Foster-Fishman, 2013). Further, given prefigurative aims of instantiating “the end in the present” (McCowan, 2009, p. 74) by enacting future-oriented social norms, psychological distance theory and research may begin to make sense of the impact of multiple temporalities in prefiguration on cognition and emotion (Lieberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, & Dale, 2010).

### **Diffusion and Contamination of Ideas, Messages, and Goals to Wider Networks**

Prefigurative movements also seek to serve as exemplars of alternative forms of organization and interaction, allowing observers to see the efficacy of different modes of being and relating (McCowan, 2009). Fielding (2007)

has referred to this aspect of prefiguration as “the insistent affirmation of possibility” (p. 551), which may spread beyond the here and now (i.e., to other actors and settings) by “contagion, emulation, or resonance” (Holloway, 2010, p. 78). Given that an effective way of disseminating ideas is to show their working in practice, prefigurative movements aim to be open, receptive, and visible, rather than insular and isolated. According to Yates (2015a), what differentiates prefigurative from counter- or sub-cultural movements is participants’ views that their actions are inherently political, as well as the shared vision that the political impact of their actions is to “consolidate, proliferate, and diffuse their perspectives and collective conducts” (p. 19). As articulated by Melucci (1985), prefiguration offers:

... the possibility of another experience of time, space, interpersonal relations. ... The medium, the movement itself as a new medium, is the message. As prophets without enchantment, contemporary movements practice in the present the change they are struggling for: *they redefine the meaning of social action for the whole society*. [emphasis added] (p. 801)

A noted challenge within movements is when growing emphasis on “lifestyle over strategic organizing” causes movements to lose their prefigurative character over time (Burdon, 2014, p. 29). That is, due to increased jargon, affinities, and habits within the group, they may be seen less as a model and more as an outgroup (Cornell, 2011). The ‘political identity paradox’ refers to the necessity of strong group identity in social movements, which can nevertheless lead to group polarization and alienation (Smucker, 2012). Beyond internal challenges, external influences that bear on movement proliferation and diffusion include (sometimes violent) state repression and co-optation into reformism (Holloway, 2010). A question for psychological research on prefiguration is: How do prefigurative actors—individually and socially—anticipate, address, and perhaps overcome these ever-present, potentially undermining forces?

A related challenge, voiced within some prefigurative contexts, is the erosion of perceived group efficacy in transforming systems of power (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). For example, some prefigurative actors have called for firmer disciplinary and strategic organization within their collective repertoires, while others have advocated for coordinated (i.e., simultaneous ‘above’ and ‘below’) pressure by forging solidarities with more traditional activist, demands-based initiatives. A psychology of prefiguration might explore supports and challenges to perceived efficacy in comparative prefigurative contexts, or how ‘above’-‘below’ integration is approached and employed. Future research in these areas will likely contribute to a deeper understanding of the meaning, experience, and practice of prefiguration in diverse, yet interrelated contexts.

Psychological literatures investigating the dissemination of ideas, goal pursuit, and intergroup collaboration and exchange are vast (Fiske et al., 2010). For example, extensive scholarship on processes of social influence, particularly minority influence and social change (Moscovici, Mucchi-Faina, & Maass, 1994), may be of interest in scholarly efforts to make sense of the psychological dimensions of prefigurative proliferation. Psychology studies within and beyond social movement scholarship examining collective solidarity and social cohesion also have the potential to provide insights into interpersonal processes that bear on movement efficacy and longevity (Reicher & Haslam, 2010; Stryker et al., 2000). Finally, the aforementioned bodies of work on group dynamics, particularly intergroup relations (Forsyth, 2009), may serve as a resource in pursuit of elucidating the formation, fostering, and dissolution of collective alliances for social change.

As discussed, relevant psychological theories and concepts abound in relation to the interpretive, affective, and ideological, as well as practical and behavior-based processes described above. As these examples illustrate,

psychology research—within and beyond the study of social movements—has explored numerous themes foundational to prefigurative social action.<sup>vi</sup> At the same time, rethinking prefigurative politics must go beyond existing theories and concepts, and engage methodologies both responsive to the context-driven nature of prefigurative praxis and consonant with the ‘bottom-up’ approach embodied within their practices.

## Rethinking Prefiguration: Methodological Considerations

A critical psychology of prefiguration has yet to grow into its clear potential in social movement scholarship. As we have seen, the practice of prefiguration can assume many forms (e.g., from protests to projects), involve diverse actors (e.g., from activists to educators), and take root in various contexts (e.g., from public squares to community gardens). Grounded understandings of the practice of prefigurative politics will result from methodological techniques that allow groups to be considered on their own terms, with recognition for contextual factors (e.g., historical, cultural, social, and physical environments) that shape their unique features (Howarth et al., 2013). Thus, exploring the intricate landscape of prefigurative social action will require judicious methodological approaches careful to avoid top-down, explanatory (i.e., universal, invariant, and transhistorical) models such as those which presently dominate social movement scholarship (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; Parker, 2007). In the following sections, I review some of these alternative methodologies and suggest ways in which scholars may in turn benefit from their engagement with prefiguration.

### “Prefigurative” Research

Consistent with the prefigurative ethos of social change from below, I highlight the value of selected qualitative methods as a first step towards developing a critical psychology of prefiguration.<sup>vii</sup> In particular, ethnographic, narrative, and participatory approaches have been identified as particularly well-suited to exploring the informal, intangible, and dynamic aspects of diverse prefigurative contexts (e.g., Hardt, 2013; Ince, 2010; Kulick, 2014; Yates, 2015a). Using such methods, awareness and appreciation for the complexity of prefigurative praxis can emerge from engaging directly in conversations with movement participants who (researchers must acknowledge) are always already empirically examining their own pursuits<sup>viii</sup> (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2012).

Several scholars have advocated for engagement with “prefigurative” research methodologies and practices (e.g., Burton, 1983; Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014; Ince, 2010). In psychology, Kagan and Burton (2000) have outlined a model for engaging in *prefigurative action research*, which is not to be considered a methodology, but rather an “organizing orientation” in research (p. 4), characterized by:

Analysis of both the structural and ideological dimensions of oppression; Emphasis on creating and sustaining examples of alternative forms of social relations that provide a vision of a just society; Participation of less powerful people; Multiple cycles of reflection, doing, and knowing; and simultaneous attention to both agency and structure in emancipatory practice. (p. 1)

Prefigurative action research developed from work with marginalized populations, and has inspired critical approaches to research conducted in community settings (e.g., Lawthom, Sixsmith, & Kagan, 2007).

In the study of social movements, Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) have proposed a framework for engaging in *prefigurative research*. Central to their notion of rethinking methodologies is the question: “Who benefits?” (p. 250). Their critique of social movement scholarship—much of which practices ‘taking’ (i.e., generating academic capital) rather than ‘giving’—is that it “has little responsibility to, or resonance with social movements, is written in impenetrable specialized jargon, and is hidden away in academic journals” (p. 251). As such, prefigurative research, to them, means working in solidarity with movements: prefiguring non-hierarchical, non-exploitative research relationships, which provide insights useful to participants and allow movements to “work on themselves” (p. 254). More generally, prefigurative research means working in the service of community, employing context-appropriate, participatory methods to foster individual well-being as well as collective liberation from systems of oppression.

### “Being the Change”: Critical Reflexivity in Prefigurative Pursuits

Not only may prefigurative inquiry give back to movements and communities, it also has the potential to benefit scholars and their disciplines. A focus on ‘means-ends consistency’ may generate critical and reflexive insights on the part of researchers regarding *how* (i.e., the means by which) they carry out their work (Campbell, 2014; Cornish et al., 2014). Just as prefiguration seeks to transform the macrostructure by altering micro-relations, greater attentiveness to power imbalances, process, and intentions in research may allow for the re-imagining and construction of alternative (innovative and liberating) methods and practices. As noted by Amsler (2014), “experimenting with prefigurative forms of politics within existing institutions of higher education ... allow[s] us to connect everyday practices with critical theories of the conditions of possibility, and offer[s] a range of methods for building confidence in cultural action,” even from within rigid institutions (p. 289).

Moreover, researchers’ greater attention to prefigurative traditions can raise questions about the *what* and *why* of research production (i.e., the ends), thus impacting the ways academics view their role—and the role of the university—in society. For example, by considering the impact of psychology interventions along a continuum of *ameliorative* (i.e., change within the system; promoting well-being) to *transformative* (i.e., change to the system; altering systems of power), psychologists may situate the implications of their research programs within a context of broader social and political change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Walker, Burton, Akhurst, & Değirmencioğlu, 2015). Examples of enacting a “transformative concern” in research and practice is perhaps most developed in the field of community psychology (Davidson et al., 2006; Liboro, 2015; Sonn & Quayle, 2014).

In the broadest sense, engaging with notions of means and ends in prefigurative praxis may shed light on an important element of critical psychology: attending to “the ways in which all varieties of psychology are culturally historically constructed, and how alternative varieties of psychology may confirm or resist ideological assumptions in mainstream models” (Parker, 2007, p. 2). Finally, by aspiring to means-ends consistency in academic pursuits, a critical psychology of prefiguration may itself serve as a “prefigurative force” (Gordo López & Pujol Tarrés, 2004, p. 53-54) on multiple fronts, anticipating and instantiating transformative change by and through working with movements and communities.

## Conclusion: Another Way is Possible

As a means to stimulate engaged scholarship on prefigurative politics, this theoretical discussion identifies critical sites of disjuncture and possibility within social movement scholarship on prefiguration, where psychological per-

spectives may serve to deepen understanding and discussion. The potential significance of psychology's contribution is further underscored by exploring linkages between existing psychological inquiry and prefigurative themes. Inspired by principles of prefiguration, this invitation also advocates a critical perspective in psychology, as a "way of connecting with the process of change and, hence, being part of changing the world" (Parker, 2007, p. 13). That is, as the unpredictable and ever-shifting landscape of contemporary movement activity changes, scholar-activist approaches—in a spirit of solidarity and mutual aid—must seek to change along with it, advancing theoretical, methodological, and practical alternatives of our own.

Though not a new feature of social movements, prefiguration represents a growing phenomenon in present-day struggles for social change (Day, 2005). As the range of prefigurative forms of resistance attest, a certain awareness "is gaining ground that the only way to change the world is to do it ourselves, and to do it here and now" (Holloway, 2010, p. 45). And yet, prefigurative protests and projects, dazzling in their diversity, face a number of challenges—struggles within a constellation of larger struggles. Many of these struggles, within their cultural or economic valences, touch upon eminently psychological realms, as individuals within social formations of every sort attempt to recreate their identities, values, and affectations towards the world around them. As such, greater attention to the psychological dimensions of prefigurative praxis may not only generate new insights into these complex social formations, but—with carefully chosen methodologies—also contribute to their survival and efficacy.

However, a critical psychology of prefiguration capable of accomplishing these tasks has yet to emerge to the extent that is clearly possible. Understanding and supporting these unique spaces of resistance necessarily involves increased psychological consideration along existing theoretical themes, but old models of research, in which participants are distantly viewed and abstractly engaged by researchers, quite often do service neither to the field nor those we study. New methodological approaches, shaped by a conscience of means-ends consistency and grounded in the complex contexts in which prefigurative movements occur, are therefore a necessity. In this, we have much to learn, both through careful reflection on our own field and from the lessons hard-learned by engagement with prefigurative action.

In closing, recent events in the field have forced a growing number of psychologists to re-examine their role within society and the ways in which those societies operate. The majority contingent of ethically-concerned and justice-oriented psychologists has, of late, made itself known. On the world stage, the rise of prefigurative proclivities within and beyond social movements has coincided with ever-increasing precarity in socio-political, economic, and ecological systems at local and global scales. Concerned psychologists could do well to engage their transformative potential—and in so doing, enable the sort of ethical transformation and reinforcement to which psychology as a field so clearly aspires.

## Notes

- i) The terms prefigurative politics and prefiguration are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript.
- ii) Given that prefiguration is subjective—that conceptions of a future, ideal world are as diverse as the individuals and groups embodying them—intentionality is what distinguishes prefiguration from Holloway's (2010) "other doings" (p. 17) more generally ("conscious or unconscious, planned or unplanned," see p. 220). Therefore, it is my view, elaborating on the perspective of Yates (2015a), that to label another's action as prefigurative when the actor does not (i.e., view their own actions as somehow self-transcendent or political) is simply the identification of prefigurative actors according to the labeler's own definition of a future, ideal society.

iii) It bears noting that what is prefigurative may not be universally considered “good” or “ideal,” as it is not a unitary construct. Prefiguration is not affiliated with a political orientation, though the literature on prefigurative political organization is primarily focused on ‘left-wing’ organizing (Breines, 1989). For an exploration of prefiguration among White power movement activists, see Futrell and Simi (2004).

iv) This is not to mention that many social movement scholars during this period were themselves active in these movements and did not view themselves as “irrational” (Stryker et al., 2000).

v) The processes comprising this framework were derived and condensed from a set of five prefigurative political priorities originally developed and elaborated by Yates (2015a).

vi) Nevertheless, these literatures fall along an uncertain continuum of significance and utility in understanding prefiguration, given their origins and use in disparate contexts. Increased attention to prefigurative politics by psychologist scholar-activists may serve to challenge or expand existing theoretical frameworks.

vii) In psychology research, qualitative methods are a useful first step to making sense of novel phenomena. Although critical methodologies generally maintain a qualitative form, they do not preclude the use of quantitative methods, particularly as a complementary data source (Parker, 2007).

viii) As noted by Amsler (2014), many groups with prefigurative sensibilities have developed “practices of self-education, collective reflexivity and collaborative systematisation of practical knowledge in attempts to create social bases for autonomous institutions” (p. 279).

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