

Liberation Psychology

Challenging Psychology and the Psychologist Through
Conscientization.

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Introduction

Liberation Psychology is a field that continues to challenge and compel psychologists, community organizers and advocates for social change. The challenge: to promote the practice and study of a psychology that is committed to addressing the pressing social issues of our time: poverty, war, forced relocation, genocide, political repression, gender and race to mention only a few. It is compelling because it offers a critique of mainstream psychology that grants psychologists an opportunity to think critically and creatively about how best to serve a wide range of individuals and communities.

From its beginnings with Martín-Baró (1942-1989), a social psychologist, to its current use in feminist psychology, community psychology and counseling psychology, it has defied a circumscribed definition. Liberation psychology has roots in an array of social science fields, and influences an equal amount of sub-disciplines in psychology. There are many psychologists in the field, and with each of these scholars, an equal number of variations in the ways they have approached their work. Martín-Baró (1994) was inspired by liberation theology (Gutierrez, 1988), the participatory action research of Kurt Lewin (1946) and Orlando Fals Borda (1988) and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1993). Flores (2009) claims that Latin American theories, in particular, have been instrumental in the development of liberation psychology. In particular he cites the theory of dependency, philosophy of liberation, critical sociology and community social psychology as examples. Geraldine Moane (2011) derives her form of liberation psychology from the psychology of colonialism of Frantz Fanon (1967) and feminist psychologists such as Jean Baker Miller (1986). Although these authors listed are a small sample of liberation psychologists, we can see why Watkins and Schulman (2008) use the term “psychologies of liberation” in reference to the heterogeneous form this field has taken.

However, despite the varying fields contributing to liberation psychology, there are themes that run throughout the literature; themes present when Martín-Baró first began writing about liberation psychology in El Salvador. In this paper, I will elaborate on the concept of conscientization, the importance of critical analysis regarding the role of the psychologist and psychology as a discipline, and understanding psychology as an ethical-political endeavor. My goals are to continue to facilitate dialogue about liberation psychology and the role psychologists play in addressing the well-being of individuals and communities. Martín-Baró's (1994) challenge can be seen as an attempt to spark a discipline-wide paradigm shift. Though he primarily wrote about a need to re-conceptualize the practice of psychology in Latin America, his work applies equally well beyond those borders.

The Role of the Psychologist and Psychology

The role of the psychologist was an important starting point for Martín-Baró (1985d/trans.1994). Living and working in El Salvador came with daily reminders that issues of power and oppression pervaded both society and psychology. He questioned whether psychologists could make any significant contribution to solving the crucial problems within his country. He pressed his colleagues to see beyond attempting to explain the world, and instead, to change it (1994, p. 19). This perspective comes directly from one of Marx's well known statements that the philosopher's role is not merely to understand the world, but to interact with and change it (Marx, 1970). Martín-Baró sought to foster a critical understanding of the inherent sociopolitical dimension of psychology, and the need to develop a mode of praxis that was responsive to this reality rather than dismissive of it. He pressed psychologists to *engage with* the sociopolitical challenges and movements around them, rather than understanding them as scientific spectators (Martín-Baró, 1985d/1994).

At the core of this commitment Martín-Baró (1985d/ trans. 1994) adopted the use of the term “conscientization” from Freire’s (1971) critical pedagogy. Conscientization comes from both Portuguese and Spanish. There is not direct translation for this word in English. A more thorough examination of both the etymology of conscientization, and its interpretations by various psychologists is needed, however, for the scope of this present paper our analysis will be limited to the use of the term more generally in Latin American liberation psychology.

Conscientization is, for the most part, considered a practice enacted by, and with, marginalized and oppressed communities and individuals. In short, it is the development of the capacity to critically reflect upon the sociopolitical realities within which people live. To frame the importance of conscientization, it helps to consider the insights from the psychologists of colonialism such as Frantz Fanon (1967) and Albert Memmi (1967, 1968). They revealed how oppression results in an increased sense of fatalism and powerlessness to create meaningful change. Conscientization is the process whereby those who are oppressed develop the ability to critically reflect, plan, and implement change in their communities. By doing so, they develop an understanding of the effects of oppression and marginalization and locate their personal distress within a sociopolitical context; they regain a sense of power and control over their individual and collective destinies as they partake in the process of transformation necessary for wellness (Martín-Baró, 1985d/ trans.1994).

But conscientization is not only reserved for the Other our work is directed toward, but refers to the way in which critical perspectives in psychology have brought greater understanding of the sociopolitical context within which psychology operates. Conscientization, if applied to the psychologist, implies the development of an ability to critically examine the sociopolitical realities that undergird and support the practice of psychology. More importantly, by developing

the capacity to think critically about psychological theory, we can evaluate the social effects of the theory itself as it is implemented (Sloan, 2011). Foucault's (1980) analysis of power is a great example here. His work highlights how the effects of power are pervasive throughout our modern bureaucratic systems; be they psychology, politics, education or the justice system. Discourses of power are infused in our disciplines, and as such, play out in ways that for many remain totally unseen. Liberation psychology has developed a way of doing psychology that first and foremost attempts to make the subtle workings of power, control, domination and oppression the focal point.

Critical thinking about our role and the work we undertake ideally results in the development of practices and theories that translate into transformative action. This type of reflexivity is necessary if the psychologist and psychology are to remain committed to practice that is socio-politically informed and responsive. The field of critical psychology has been hugely influential in this regard; providing critiques of psychology upon which liberation psychology practices have been developed (Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin, 2011).

Current literature in liberation psychology provides examples in which critical questions have become focal points. Bernardo Jiménez-Domínguez (2009) explores the relationship between power and knowledge in social psychology. He emphasizes the contextual nature of knowledge, seeking to situate the source of knowledge construction within the lived-experience of those the researcher is seeking to help. Martín-Baró (1986d/ trans.1994) also stressed that in taking the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed, the ideology of the oppressor could be exposed. He accomplished this through the use of opinion surveys, in which he compiled community members' reflections about their experiences and contrasted them with the claims of political authorities regarding the situation in San Salvador (Martín-Baró, 1994).

Maritza Montero (2009) believes that through participatory methods community members, and psychologists themselves, can begin to examine the relationship between knowledge production and contextualized ways of living and knowing. Knowledge is co-created in participation and dialogue, not through detached observation under highly controlled circumstances. This marks a shift in epistemology, one which has as an affinity with post-positivist philosophies of science, particularly hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2004), social constructionist approaches (Gergen, 1999), and pragmatism (Rorty, 1979; Hacking, 1983).

Both Jiménez-Domínguez (2009) and Montero (2009) discuss how the critical consciousness of the practitioner is developed in tandem with community members. It is impossible, therefore, to comprehend the role of the psychologist or the experience of community members without attempting to involve the sociopolitical reality within which these occur. Conscientization is not limited to the identified subject or marginalized community; it is a practice the psychologist must engage in as well. An example of psychologists undertaking this type of work outside of Latin America is the work done by Brett Bowman and Norman Duncan (2009).

Brett Bowman and Norman Duncan (2009) provide a stunning example of psychologists' need to critically examine their role in an article entitled "Liberating South African Psychology: The legacy of racism and the pursuit of representative knowledge production". The article explores the experience of psychologists within a sociopolitical context that has held very rigid expectations of practice and theory. In post-apartheid South Africa, issues of power and race remain ubiquitous. Bowman and Duncan explore the measurement of race and the history of intelligence testing and its use to support "white" superiority. They forcefully argue that

psychologists must attend to these histories in order to understand the nature of knowledge-construction within any sort of political atmosphere.

Bowman and Duncan (2009) claim that liberation psychology has been instrumental in providing a critique of traditional psychology and the roles undertaken by its practitioners. They wish to highlight the emancipatory element inherent in attempting to develop a socially relevant psychology. Emancipation is adopted as an imperative in large part because they believe psychology's "first-world" agenda has fostered apathy regarding the social issues in South Africa (Bowman & Duncan, 2009). In addition, they accuse South African psychologists of acting as "relays" for the preoccupations of their educators in North America and Europe. As a result, most of the research, methodologies and philosophy of science represented in South Africa mirror the interests of white Europeans. They aim their critique at South African psychologists who are producing knowledge that has played little role in the promotion of positive social change in South Africa. Bowman and Duncan believe that many of the psychologists themselves need to be liberated from a narrow vision of psychology, and welcome "methodological pluralism" (Burton & Kagan 2009, Bowman & Duncan 2009).

The work of liberation psychologists has been well documented in recent years. For example, a special issue in *Feminism and Psychology* (Lykes & Moane eds., 2009) was published in 2009. An edited collection appearing the same year titled, "Psychology of Liberation: Theory and Applications" (Montero & Sonn, 2009) contains 15 articles detailing liberation work in a wide range of contexts, some mentioned here. Adrienne Aron (2012) for example, recently wrote a paper titled "Martín-Baró and the 99%: From El Salvador to Occupy" (unpublished paper). However, there are still challenges within the field. In a paper presented at the British Psychological Society's Section for History and Philosophy of Psychology in 2002,

Mark Burton claimed that a great deal of work in liberation psychology has “a tendency to continually restate its distinctive approach, perhaps at the expense of further development” (Burton & Kagan, 2005). While this paper may be implicated in such a critique, there is still value in clarifying just what liberation psychology *is* doing.

Liberation psychologists continue to ask the question; for whom does psychology work? Martín-Baró (1985d/ trans.1994) wrote:

The critical questions that psychology must formulate with regard to its activity, and it follows, with regard to the role it is carrying out in society, should not be centered on where the work is done, but rather on by whom; nor should it be looking at how something is done, so much as for whose benefit. (p. 45)

As we have seen from a brief sample of the current literature an emphasis on producing knowledge from within the lived-experience of the oppressed and marginalized has continued. Martín-Baró (1985d/ trans.1994) was clear about what he felt needed to happen in psychology. Rather than participate in the systems that “cement the structure of injustice” he was committed in his belief that “it is within the psychologist’s purview to intervene in the subjective processes that sustain those structures of injustice and make them viable” (p. 45). This is the essence of conscientization; which applies directly to the critical consciousness of the psychologist as well. For liberation psychology to continue working in a world that is replete with sociopolitical challenges, we ourselves as psychologists need to remain committed to the development of our own critical consciousness.

Liberation psychologists have described conscientization as the process through which individuals develop a greater capacity to reflect, interpret, and act for the promotion of positive change. I believe the discipline of psychology itself would benefit greatly from a heavy dose of

conscientization. We must attempt to understand how our theory and practice have practical consequences in the real world. We must attend to the ethical-political role our discipline embodies.

Psychology as an Ethical-political Endeavor

Psychology is an ethical-political endeavor. Its practices are influenced by and influence our societies. Knowledge gained about learning directly impacts a child's experience in school. How we interpret depression and other mental health symptoms leads to the development of interventions undertaken by millions. The fact that psychology has such an immediate role in our societies impresses upon us the need to develop a form of praxis that is acutely aware of this responsibility. Martín-Baró (1986d/ trans. 1994) understood the development of a new praxis to be the heart of liberation psychology. This praxis was to be aimed at the production of ways of doing psychology that were attentive the lived experience of those most affected by the sociopolitical challenges of the day. He wrote:

To acquire new psychological knowledge it is not enough to place ourselves in the perspective of the people; it is necessary to involve ourselves in a new praxis, an activity of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is but also about what is not, and by which we may try to orient ourselves toward what ought to be. (p. 28-29)

The ethical-political nature of psychology is brought to the forefront of praxis; to truly understand something one must participate with it. And this participation requires a committed stance to address the pressing needs of our time. As liberation psychology has made an emphasis on working with individuals and communities suffering from the effects of oppression and marginalization, participation is a highly charged undertaking.

While at the heart of liberation psychology is the interest in working toward transformative action, simultaneously there occurs an accumulation of ideas and knowledge that generate a need for the development of transformative theory. This mirrors what Tod Sloan (2011) considers “doing theory critically” (p. 324). If we were to take a broad view of liberation psychology and its praxis, I believe that we would see what Watkins and Schulman (2008) term the movement to “democratize the generation of knowledge” (p. 270). Martín-Baró (1994) directed psychologists and psychology toward the needs of the marginalized and oppressed, and in doing so sparked a movement that has inspired more and more psychologists to theorize critically, to seek the experience of conscientization in their lives while simultaneously working toward social and personal transformation. Martín-Baró’s personal commitment to his work and professional identity was a catalyst in the development of a whole new way of doing, and being, a psychologist. This type of commitment, sadly, came at a great cost as he was forever silenced by a Salvadoran death squad on November 16th, 1989. However, his passion and insights continue to challenge our conventional understanding of psychology itself, and his contributions to the field are as valuable and relevant today as they were then.

As a practicing Jesuit priest and professional psychologist, it is likely that Martín-Baró valued commitment and active participation in the communities he worked with. His ties to liberation theology are well known, and his commitment to a “preferential option for the poor” (Gutierrez, 1988) – a central tenet of liberation theology – is breathed into his aspirations to clarify just for whom psychology was working (Martín-Baró, 1994). We can see that he did not shy away from aligning his personal and professional identities. Some may question such a radical identification of oneself with one’s work, but this stance was unquestionably in favor of bettering the lives of those he saw suffer under sociopolitical oppression and marginalization.

His commitment has inspired a host of psychologists from around the world, and sparked international conversations about the role of the psychologist and psychology itself. One can only hope that his example, combined with the ongoing work of liberation psychologists around the world, will continue to function as a catalyst for critical dialogue among psychologists regarding what our role ought to be given the challenges faced by so many.

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