

# **Responding to contemporary crises: an ethical action framework.\***

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## **Summary**

We are living in a time of crisis. The crises that define our context are economic, ecological, social and political. Some of their consequences, poverty, exclusion and the reduction and restructuring of education, health and welfare, define the working context of most psychologists, and the conditions of life of those with whom many psychologists work. Other consequences are less visible, either because their physical consequences (climate change for example) are not yet immediate, or (like super-exploitation in the majority world) they do not affect us in this country directly. But taken together the changed and worsening situation calls for a renewal of the ethical basis for practising psychology. In this talk I will, drawing on my own practical and theoretical journeys, outline an approach that goes beyond professional ethical codes, setting out a basis for a scholarly activism that is orientated to community and social renewal while taking sides with the increasing numbers of the oppressed and excluded.

## **Introduction**

I'm very honoured to have been awarded the BPS award for promoting equality of opportunity. Rather than talking about the work I've done leading up to this, I will instead, bearing in mind that it is the BPS Ethics committee that has made the award, talk about an ethical orientation that has evolved over the course of my career, and on which I've now had the opportunity to reflect.

First, I would like to acknowledge the Community Psychology

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Section of the British Psychological Society and its founding chairperson, Jaqui Akhurst who nominated me. It is the orientation of community psychology that perhaps best exemplifies this necessary perspective of being both of psychology and beyond the discipline. Community Psychology is certainly concerned with people's actions, experiences, thoughts and beliefs, but its interest is at the level of the community rather than the individual and as such it offers a corrective to the psychologisation that can occur within psychology, and indeed the wider so-called psy-complex.

The award is for "the promotion of Equality of Opportunity", but isn't that a problematic concept? In "a world that's ill-divided" in the words of an old Manchester song, isn't the idea of equality of opportunity a diversion? Rather than addressing the root causes of disadvantage, oppression and exclusion, the idea of equality of opportunity cuts short the debate, ameliorating the effects of structural and systemic inequalities, compensating for the inequalities of circumstance that have already been allowed to occur. This is a bit of a simplification and I don't want to detract from the value of such ameliorative action, after the fact. But by only having such a focus the danger is that there a wider, transformational, liberatory orientation is effectively silenced. To illustrate, British equalities legislation puts a duty on public authorities to combat discrimination, but while including discrimination on the basis of disability, age, gender, sexual orientation and race, it leaves the dimensions of class, income and location to one side. Living in city where according to Save the Children (Save the Children, 2011), more than a quarter of our children are growing up in severe poverty, I'm perhaps particularly aware of the limitations of conventional 'equality of opportunity' thinking.

### ***The mess we're in***

But this is just one dimension of the appalling situation we find ourselves in in 2013. A perfect storm of economic, ecological,

social and political crises is upon us, crises that threaten not just our standard of living but the very basis for human life. These crises have relevance for the work of psychologists, and for psychologists as social scientists and as citizens: Some of their consequences, poverty, exclusion, the reduction and restructuring of education, health and welfare, define the working context of most psychologists, and the conditions of life of those with whom many psychologists work. Other consequences are less visible, either because their physical consequences (climate change for example) are not yet immediate, or (like super-exploitation in the majority world) their direct impact on us in this country is not obvious.

The present conjuncture, however, is not just a list of problems, but a time of crisis for dominant ways of understanding and managing our society, and indeed the world system. For the problems we now confront are indeed systemic in nature, whether we are thinking of the extraordinary, tolerated, levels of inequality, or climate change, or the privations inflicted on elderly and disabled people using our publicly funded service systems. Taken together the changed and worsening situation calls for a renewal of the ethical basis, not just for practising psychology, but for our whole society.

To explore this I'll draw on my own practical and theoretical journeys (although time does not permit exploration of how they inform me?), to outline an approach that goes beyond professional ethical codes, setting out a basis for a scholarly activism that is orientated to community and social renewal while taking sides with the increasing numbers of the oppressed and excluded.

First let's explore two very different manifestations of the present malaise.

1) As I set about writing this, today's news is again of the

unnecessary deaths of learning disabled people, typically due to a failure to identify and treat remediable illness. I have seen this myself, with cases of staggeringly poor practice in general hospitals and in the deaths of apparently healthy people from undetected conditions, and the reluctance, nay refusal of much of the primary care health service to carry out its basic responsibilities to carry out positive health checks, screening for treatable conditions. The reduction in life expectancy is estimated to be around 13 years for men and 20 years for women (Heslop et al., 2013), by my calculation 1800 preventable deaths in England and Wales every year (Burton, 2013). But denial of the conditions for living, in its broader sense, is not just a problem of mainstream health care. We have seen the appalling cruelty at Winterbourne View, not just the result of a few malign staff, but by an incompetent system that failed to treat those young people as citizens in need of a combination of kindness and technical know how, available at or near to home, if they were to flourish. And nor, again is this just a problem facing the relatively small group of intellectually disabled people, as the Mid Staffs scandal shows. In that case my initial instinct is to blame the neoliberal commodification of care, together with an allied approach to performance management that lost sight of the real content of the caring relationship. Yet I fear there is a second dynamic at work. How could it be that staff acted so callously - as it were leaving their hearts at the entrance of the hospital? Is this just reducible to the particular conditions of the NHS under the neoliberal regime or is there more to it? I remember the conditions endured by vulnerable people in 'mental handicap "hospitals"' and 'geriatric hospitals' under the pre-Thatcher NHS and it was nothing to celebrate at all. Care scandals are not new despite being made more likely by running the system instrumentally and with tight resources.

2) Until quite recently it would have been possible to refer to the ecological crisis as just one more dimension of our present predicament. Now, however it is the central problem. The Arctic is melting, methane is being released, reflectivity is

reduced and we have CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations of around 390ppm, unprecedented in human history and prehistory. We are at the threshold of runaway global warming (Anderson & Bows, 2010) and that is just one of the three planetary limits that we are now crossing (Rockström et al., 2009). This is an emergency that puts all the other elements into relief. We don't know what window might remain to mitigate runaway climate change, probably none, nor do we know what window there might be to adapt. But we are very likely on the threshold of the greatest population crash in the life of our species.

The climate crisis is curious. There is the well known denialism and even psychological analyses of it (Weintrobe, 2012), much of it funded by oil companies and right wing US think tanks (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2010; Goldenberg, 2013; York, 2010) – I call this *vulgar denialism*. But there is also a *finessed denialism*, evident in the co-existence in government policy of climate change legislation together with the prioritisation of economic growth, incompatible with emissions reduction targets, not to mention the establishment of an office for the exploitation of unconventional oil and gas. And to some extent we are all denialists – it's how we stay sane in the face of impending catastrophe.

This manufactured ecological crisis has an equalities dimension: continued inaction is condemning people to pain and suffering, treating them as of less worth than others. But while this starts with people in places like the Andean altiplano, the Sahel, or the coast of Bangladesh, it extends potentially to all of us - certainly to my children and grandchildren – an inequality constructed inter-generationally.

I have come to think about these issues in terms of what I call ideology-action-structure complexes in which ideology, action and structure support one other. This reality is layered and contradictory, so some elements can at times appear to be in conflict even though they hang together as an overall hegemonic complex. I've tried to identify a number of these I-A-S C's (Burton, 2013), for example:

1. The rational administration of complexity
2. Taming natures
3. Linear progress
4. The dominance of exchange and possession
5. The primacy of exploitation
6. Monoculturality and the suppression of other cultural systems
7. Assumed superiority

But where do they come from? It has been said that we are no longer in the holocene epoch but in the anthropocene, where the influence of the human species on our planetary systems is decisive. Dating the point at which it all started to go so wrong is difficult. For some it was the adoption of agriculture, leading to sufficient surplus for urban communities, and to the depletion of soils and forests, the first localised instances of climate change. For others it was the evolution of capitalism, a system the goal of which is to accumulate more and more capital, without end. For others it was somewhere in between, perhaps the adoption of monotheism. I am increasingly persuaded though by the thesis that an absolutely pivotal moment was the colonisation of the Americas, from 1492, an analysis that is made by number of de-colonising thinkers and activists from the Global South and Latin America in particular, for it was there that other humans appear to have been first redefined as subhuman (Dussel, 1995, 2000; Lander, 2000a, 2000b; Mignolo, 1997; Quijano, 2000), a problematic explored by Shakespeare in *The Tempest* (Fernández Retamar, 1993; Mannoni, 1956).

A key hypothesis is that the colonising moment ushered in a then new, but now dominant, way in which Western society treats 'the other' - the marginal, the frail, the inconvenient, the outsider, the "lower orders", extending to those we don't know, future generations, people in other parts of the world. So the colonisation that took place in the American continent

both supported and provided models for the new ideology-action-structure complexes there, in the later regions of colonisation and in the heart and hinterland of the imperialist centres themselves. Coloniality did not require a colony any more, but was a model of domination that applied between classes and also in relation to other groups: the poor, the disabled, the unconventional and the delinquent. The social technologies that emerged within the action moment of the colonial ideology-action-structure complexes were generalised to other contexts and are with us still, as exemplified in the list I referred to earlier.

If this account is taken seriously it means that coloniality is integral to the modern world and to **all** the problem areas described above. To tackle these problems requires something much more radical than most previous or current reform movements or proposals envisage. Rather than trying to fix the capitalist-colonial-ecocidal systems that we are all embedded in, it is necessary to work for their replacement, and this requires work that tackles the ideology, the action-systems and the structures of the present systems of domination of populations and nature.

This is a hypothesis but, if supported, it calls for a different approach to ethics, one that starts from the ethical relationship between people and especially with the vulnerable, marginalised, oppressed, excluded and invisible, and the rest of us, and between people and nature. It means a focus not so much on the administrative techniques of the state and market (within which I include the technologies of psychological assessment and intervention) as on the very nature of social relations that we mean to construct. This orientation has a lot in common with those early opponents of the modern regime, the Levellers, the Ranters and the Diggers. It connects with concerns of feminism and (in that it rejects the duality people-nature) with the ecological dimension. You can find it in a number of contemporary social movements, for example the Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien movements of the contemporary Andes (Fatheuer, 2011; Gudynas, 2011; Lanza, 2012), and perhaps

those approaches to the position of the very disabled that start from an ethical problematisation of the situation of the other (Vanier, 2006; Wolfensberger, 1994). It is also to be found in the orientation known as Liberation Psychology which specifically starts from the perspective of the oppressed, the excluded, the other, aiming to turn psychology on its head so that its knowledge and practice is continually interrogated from the perspective of the other.

With this in mind let us turn to the ethical orientations provided by professional bodies. The cynic might say that such codes are the cosmetic trappings that legitimate the profession, as profession. It might also be said that the attempt to codify ethics in terms of do's and don'ts is antithetical to the process of acting ethically – in Kohlbergian terms it is tantamount to an immature stage in moral development. There may be some truth in both these critiques, but the BPS at least does stress the need for constant critical reflection in its 2009 Code of Ethics and Conduct. Yet on re-reading it I find a different kind of gap. Consider its four underpinning ethical principles: *respect, competence, responsibility* and *integrity*. What is missing? Let me contrast this list with the, admittedly unconventional framework of the philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel: Dussel identifies three ethical principles: 1. the material: the production, reproduction and development of the life of each and every human subject, in its biological, social and spiritual dimensions, 2. the communicative or inter-subjective principle: focussed on procedures for reaching agreement (equivalent to the school of discourse ethics), and 3. the practical, which leads us to a consideration of what it is actually possible to achieve (equivalent to the pragmatic school of ethics). But he then makes clear that each one of these must be subjected to a constant critique from the perspective of the oppressed other - in both a negative critical sense and in a positive reconstructive sense. I haven't time to go into the details here, but for me, compared to any professional ethical code this approach is both more positively focussed on the

consideration of what is good and right and more critical, recognising the conflictual nature of any social action. It is therefore more comprehensive and more challenging.

The point here is that psychology needs an ethical point of reference against which to check its content but it is not enough to rely on internal self correction within the discipline; the challenge needs to come from those affected or potentially affected (positively or negatively) by the discipline's conceptual and practical constructions and actions.

In the best work within the framework of the psychology of liberation, an approach is taken, where as Ignacio Martín-Baró explained it, the oppressed other constructs, with the specialist, a liberatory praxis comprising both *understanding* and *action* - to transform lived reality (Martín-Baró, 1996). This is not a difficult idea but it is one that is quite alien to the dominant approaches in psychology.

Yet this orientation to understanding and action implies the active involvement in principled social transformation – instead of merely being scientists, scientist practitioners, technicians or professionals, a more engaged role is adopted, one that has been variously called organic intellectual / engaged scholar / scholar-activist / intellectual in the public sphere. And to reassure you that I am not just advocating political activism, the point is both to adopt a healthy, and socially supported critique of psychology's concepts and methods *and* to use them for human liberation.

One of Martín-Baró's associates and interpreters, the Venezuelan social psychologist Maritza Montero (cited in Lander, 2000b) discusses the new social scientific perspective that has emerged from the liberatory and de-colonising movements in Latin America as “a way of seeing the world, interpreting it and acting on it” with the following key organising ideas:

- A conception of community and of participation, in which knowledge is relational, both in its production and in the

way we conceptualise it.

- The idea of liberation through social praxis, based on the mobilization of conscience and the expansion of consciousness. It leads to a critique of the received ways of apprehending, constructing and being in the world.
- The redefinition of the role of the social researcher in relation to the Other, who is recognised in their own right, as the subject and object of research, as well as its co-creator.
- The historical character of knowledge: indeterminate, undefined, unfinished and relative.
- The multitude of voices from a variety of life-worlds, with equal claims for authenticity.
- A perspective that recognises domination, and consequently resistance too.
- The tension between minorities and majorities and alternative modes of doing and knowing.
- The need to rethink the methods and approaches of social science and social technology and their role in positive and negative social transformation.

(Montero, cited in Lander, E, 2000b, translated and reworded MB)

It is a similar conception that has guided my own work, both as a public servant and as a scholar, although I would add the responsibility to be a public intellectual. (It is only in the English speaking world where "intellectual" is an insult.) I am not saying I have consistently done this, but for the last 30 and more years my commitment has been to work together with the disadvantaged, together building a better social reality, itself nurtured by experience in action and the integration of different forms of knowledge and expertise, not just from the professionals but from disabled people and their families, dissident social thinkers and social movement activists too.

And I believe that this approach is fully consistent with the best traditions of public service and responsible professionalism and scholarship. It is not compatible with a self-serving, fashion following technocratic elite, the anti-intelligentsia, that uses the cloak of professionalism to evade accountability and scrutiny of their arts.

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