

Explaining liberation psychology in English

Author

Mark Burton

Abstract

Although Liberation Psychology emerged in Latin America the issues that it addresses are found throughout the world. And although there are liberatory psychologies that address oppression outside Latin America, the specific concepts that emerged in Martín-Baró's work, and have since been applied and developed by others, are particularly relevant to debates on critical approaches to psychology in Europe and North America. The inaccessibility of the Spanish and Portuguese literature to most English-speaking psychologists has been a barrier to the fruitful sharing of praxis among people doing similar work in different continents. I will reflect on efforts to make Liberation Psychology more accessible to those who use English, through writing and speaking, and through the establishment of the English Language Liberation Psychology Network, and on the barriers to the development of greater solidarity in thinking and working among psychologists from different language communities.

Brief resumé of LP and why it is important

LP as a critical psychology, but one that goes beyond mere criticism and (re)constructs an action-orientated psychology, grounded in the commitment to and perspective of the oppressed. IMB's intervention and three elements:

(1) A 'new horizon': an outward turn from preoccupation with the scientific and social status of the discipline, and redefinition of purpose in terms of the needs and interests of the majority of the (Latin American) people whose needs had been neglected both in the universities and in professional practice;

(2) 'A new epistemology' where the criterion for psychology's relevance, and indeed truth, is found through its interrogation by those popular Latin American majorities in a lived process of revision. That would not involve a rejection of all previously existing psychology but critically sifting its models and theories, discovering their 'validity or deficiency, their usefulness or uselessness, their universality or provincialism ... their potential for liberation or subjugation' (1986: 27);

(3) 'A new praxis': rather than merely academically adopting an assumed perspective of the oppressed other, knowledge will come from the attempt to transform that reality. This involves '*an activity that transforms reality*.'

In contrast, the 'critical psychology' that has evolved within the Academy in the English speaking world has tended to be isolated from praxis, with a hyper-developed theoretical abstraction.

English speaking psy – both hegemonic Anglo-American and mode of communication for 'peripheral' areas

When considering 'psychology in English' there are two aspects that are important.

1) English is the language of the UK and USA, historic and current centres of global domination, along with their satellites (Australasia, Canada), respectively. English is thereby the language of the dominant psychology, so criticised by Martín-Baró. Despite these being centres of global domination, there is considerable exclusion and oppression within these countries, probably increasingly so with factors such as increased migration and the co-existence of multiple forms of exploitation, and the advent of austerity policies, reversing the gains of the post-war settlement between capital and labour.

2) English, however, is also used as a primary, or professional means of communication in many other areas, including regions of the global South such as South Africa and India, as well as by psychologists in countries that while never dominated by England or the US, use the language as a means of communication while understanding and being vigilant of the risk of imperial ideology being smuggled in with the forms of expression and vocabulary.

Most relevant and problematic aspects for us

How then does Latin American Liberation Psychology translate to the diverse English speaking world?

From a standpoint of the one country of the capitalist core, the UK, we identified the following particularly relevant and distinctive features.

1. 'conscientization',
2. 'realismo-critico' and 'de-ideologisation'
3. the social-societal orientation,
4. 'the preferential option for the oppressed majorities'
5. methodological eclecticism.

We still argue that these are distinctive and most relevant. However, we also acknowledge the relevance of the emphasis on the recovery of historical memory, especially in countries that like much of Latin America have experienced civil conflict and State terror. In the CCCs this concept tends not to resonate immediately – a real contrast from the Latin American experience. Often this seems to be because some important cultural experiences (for example those of a more collective way of life on the land, or the struggles of the working class movement during the installation of capitalism and the industrial revolution, are beyond the reach of living memory now, at least in the UK.

So, given its relevance and interest to psychologists who understand and communicate in English, I set out in 2003 to make the approach more available to them. There were some other attempts, for example the collection of papers by IMB edited by Adrienne Aron and Shawn Corne,

published by Harvard U.P., but there had been little attempt to interpret LP, for the English speaking contexts.

Strategies to diffuse

Over the last 10 years or so, I have used the following strategies to communicate and explain LP.

1. Describing and interpreting
2. Writing, Speaking, sharing – where possible using publicly accessible outlets, or reproducing the work in those spaces. Note the surprising consequences – e.g. colleagues in Portugal, Spain and parts of LA who came across these approaches for the first time via our work.
3. Applying / adapting, developing (use argument of 2nd LP), communication to audiences in places like Turkey and Palestine.
4. Network initiative

Liberation Psychology Network

It was established in November, 2011

There are 82 members (via the website that has provisions for networking among members, although the platform has not proved particularly user-friendly for some). There are another 100 on the fairly low volume email list 95 pieces have been posted to the website's blog. There are 82 Twitter followers. There is a Library of documents, and a bibliography.

There is a fair amount of interest but largely passive – why? How might we make the network more participative, more owned by the members?

I am not the only person promoting, discussing and developing LP in the English speaking world – the contributions of colleagues such as Adrienne Aron, Tod Sloan, Brinton Lykes, Mary Watkins, Geraldine Moane, Chris Sonn and Taiwo Afuape should be noted, as well as those of colleagues from the Spanish speaking countries such as Maritza Montero who have also written and presented in English. If there is anything distinctive about my work it is to try and make information about LP as accessible as possible, particularly beyond the Academy, because if it to have any relevance, that is where it will be.