

Liberation Psychology: Learning From Latin America¹

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This is part of a longer project with aims of understanding the development of Latin American Social Psychology of Liberation, and reviewing its potential contribution to theory and practice of applied psychology in the British (and related) context.

The article is based on a) reading the literature in Spanish (and where available) in English, but not the Brazilian literature in Portuguese; b) attendance at the International Congresses of Social Psychology for Liberation in 2001 and 2002; c) discussions with Latin American and other colleagues working within this framework; d) visits to Venezuelan community social psychology projects in 1996 and 2002, and e) the responses to an email questionnaire to selected leaders in the field in 2002.

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Caminando, caminando

Voy buscando libertad

Ojalá encuentre camino

Para seguir caminando

Walking, walking on

I 'm looking for freedom

Let's hope I find the path

To keep walking on

Victor Jara [d. 12 September 1973] (1970)

Liberation Social Psychology

Over the last decade a new field, Liberation Social Psychology² (psicología social de la liberación - PSL) has emerged in Latin America. It has earlier origins, but

² This title is problematic. The Spanish term is *La Psicología Social de la Liberación*. It could translate as Social Psychology of Liberation, Liberation Social Psychology, or Social Psychology for Liberation, which I have chosen to use here. Each of the terms has been suggested by someone working in this field with good knowledge of Spanish and English.

it is only fairly recently that psychologists have used this term to identify and orientate their work. The orientation is now beginning to receive interest in Europe (Blanco, 1998; de la Corte Ibañez, 2001, undated) and North America (Lykes, 2000; Martín-Baró, 1996b; Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). As yet, however there has been no survey of the field in English.

Key locations and socio-political contexts for this work have included repression and civil war in El Salvador, the aftermath of the dictatorships in Chile, Argentina and other countries, the experience of poor, marginalised and/or migrant communities in Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, and Brazil. Other contributions have come from Mexico, Cuba, and Colombia, and outside the region from Spain and North America. More recently, workers from South Africa and Australasia have identified with this body of theory and practice.

Why consider Liberation Social Psychology?

It is important to recognise that Liberation Social Psychology developed in a very different context to our own. The societies of Latin America are far from identical, but are all characterised to a greater or lesser extent by endemic poverty and exclusion often affecting the majority of the population. This is a result of both the dependent and neo-colonial nature of their economies and severe internal inequalities (Sánchez & Wiesenfeld, 1991). Intellectuals are often less integrated into the state's systems than here and this has often allowed a certain freedom to develop autonomous approaches that don't serve the state or oligarchy (Jiménez 1990). The intellectual traditions in psychology and social science differ from those in the English speaking world, being in some ways closer to those of continental Europe, but with distinctive elements of their own.

Despite the differences between Latin America and the Europe, there are a number of reasons for considering and learning from this Latin American body of work.

A response to criticisms of traditional psychology

Much of the work of PSL developed in response to the 'crisis of social psychology' of the 1970s. That crisis was experienced in Britain, and North America (Armistead, 1974; Parker, 1989), but also acutely in Latin America. It may be summarised in terms of three problems with empirical social psychology:-

1 *Its social irrelevance* - social psychology did not seem to be producing much practical knowledge that addressed the social problems either within the societies in which it was being developed or elsewhere.

2 *A parochial context of discovery combined with pretension of universal validity* - social psychology was over dependent on investigations of particular populations in artificial settings (especially undergraduate students in formal experiments). Despite this it attempted to suggest general social psychological principles that would apply to all human beings in all contexts.

3 *The imitation of scientific neutrality* meant a denial of the moral dimension - a supposed value freedom.

However, the route taken in by PSL has differed from that in the 'core countries'³, where the academic field has settled into a broadly peaceful co-existence between empiricists and social constructionists, with little impact on psychological work in field contexts, and much of the critical effort remaining within the academic community at a highly theoretical level.

³ This term refers to the countries in chiefly in North America and Europe that are central to the dominant global economic system, and is used in contrast to those whose economies are peripheral.

A model for working with oppressed groups

PSL developed specifically in relation to the problem of the 'popular majorities', the oppressed, marginalised, excluded masses in Latin America. We too have oppressed and marginalised populations in our midst, such as people marginalised because of the way our society discriminates on the basis of disability, age, ill health, nationality, appearance, sex and sexuality and poverty. Psychology as a whole has neglected this fact of exclusion, it hardly making an entry into the formal literature (Burton & Kagan, in press, 2004). The special conditions in Latin America, particularly the experience of state and paramilitary terror in many of the countries, also make PSL a valuable resource for our context, whether working with refugees fleeing persecution and torture, or trying to help rebuild fractured communities.

In the global context

Latin American psychologists working with a liberatory orientation tend to see themselves as part of a broader movement for social and economic justice. Key areas addressed in PSL include commitment, ideology, subjectivity and identity. These are fundamental to any collective action that mobilises people, and especially that which emphasises unity in diversity. The recent mass mobilisation of people against the UK collusion with the US neo-conservatives' wars, and the ongoing struggle to protect public services, are two examples of resistance to the globalising neoliberal phase of capitalist expansion for which tools from PSL would be a helpful resource.

Understanding its context

PSL should be understood as part of a broader intellectual and political movement that began in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, and continues with renewed vigour now. All of the currents have been concerned with rethinking and

reconstructing particular disciplines (education, theology, psychology, sociology, philosophy) from the perspective of the poor, the excluded, marginalised, or oppressed⁴, and through engagement and solidarity with them. The emphasis has been on the popular (populous) majorities of Latin America and the 'two-thirds world'.

Core Ideas

It is somewhat difficult to characterise all the psychological work from Latin America that has a liberatory orientation. Not all those working broadly within this tradition would want to use the title - indeed it is unlikely that anyone would claim to be a 'liberation psychologist', such a title sounding both pompous and pre-judgmental of the consequences of one's work. A further problem is that much of the work in the area is unpublished, especially where there is not a strong university base for the work. Accordingly, in published work there is something of a bias towards the more theoretical contributions and a lack of documentation of much innovative practice in the field. It is also not easy to obtain literature published in Latin America: for example much appears in small circulation books rather than in journals. Nevertheless several common themes permeate the work, both of those who have organised under this banner (for example at the annual international congresses of psicología social de la liberación, since 1998), and those whose work would fit the paradigm even if they do not necessarily identify with it.

The term psicología de la liberación appears to have first appeared in print as early as 1976 (Caparrós & Caparrós, 1976), but it was brought into widespread use by two key writers.

⁴ These terms share a meaning but also have rather different resonances which will not be explored here, except to note that more recent writers have tended to prefer victims/victimisation and the excluded/exclusion rather than use the broader categories of the poor or the oppressed.

Ignacio Martín-Baró was a Jesuit priest and a senior academic at the University of Central America in San Salvador. He is the key thinker in PSL. He first used the term *Psicología de la Liberación* in 1986, but his writings and practice before and after this date form a body of 'Social Psychology from the Latin American reality' with an explicitly liberatory focus (Martín-Baró, 1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1996b, 1998a, 2003, 2000) (see also Dobles, 1986; Pacheco & Jiménez, 1990; J.J. Vazquez, 2000). Martín Baró was one of the six Jesuits murdered in 1989 by an elite brigade of the Salvadorian army financed and trained by the USA (Galeano, 1998; Toomey, 2001), largely because of their even handed exposure of the reality of Salvadorian society in the context of the revolutionary uprising and civil war (de la Corte Ibañez, 2001; Sobrino, 1990).

Maritza Montero is a Venezuelan social psychologist. She used the term from 1991 in a way similar to Martín-Baró, with emphasis on overcoming of dependency at both the individual and the community level. She had worked with an explicitly liberatory perspective from much earlier, chiefly in political psychology (Montero, 1991) and could now be regarded as the leading theorist in the field (Montero, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 1997). In an English language text, Hollander (1997) used the term (from Martín-Baró) to characterise the largely psychoanalytically informed work with the victims of the military dictatorships of the Southern Cone countries. However, this is not the accepted use of the term in Latin America. In 2003 a special edition of the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, on the Psychology of Liberation, appeared, focussing chiefly on work outside Latin America that has a liberatory intent (Watts & Serrano-García, 2003).

Latin American Liberatory Praxis

Over the last three decades or so a set of contributions has emerged in Latin America that could collectively be called Latin American Liberatory Praxis, having both theoretical and practical elements, intimately connected. The main strands have been Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1972; Kane, 2001), Economic Dependency Theory (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979), Liberation Theology (Batstone, Mendieta, Lorentzen, & Hopkins, 1997; Gutiérrez, 1973), the Sociology of Liberation and Participatory Action research (Fals Borda, 1988; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991), the Philosophy of Liberation (Alcoff & Mendieta, 2000; Dussel, 1997, 1998) and the Psychology of Liberation itself.

A key theme in liberation thought is that liberation is not a thing that can be located in a moment in time. It is not something to be given, but rather it is a movement and a series of processes. It has its origins in the interaction of two types of agents or activists: -

1. External catalytic agents (which could, for example, include community psychologists), and
2. The oppressed groups themselves.

This Latin American notion of liberation proposes a strategic alliance between these two sectors. A central idea is Freire's concept of *conscientization* (Freire, 1972) explained by Martín-Baró (1996a) as follows. The human being is transformed through changing his/her reality, by means of an active process of dialogue in which there is a gradual decoding of the world, as people grasp the mechanisms of oppression and dehumanisation. This opens up new possibilities for action. The new knowledge of the surrounding reality leads to new self-understanding about the roots of what people are at present and what they can become in the future. Freire was careful not to provide blueprints for this process, since every situation is different, and the danger is that the worker will misapply a concrete model from one context to another where the particularities are different.

Dussel (1998), in a panoramic work constantly cited by those working under the PSL banner, has summarised this and related models and experiences in more generalised terms. He posits a 'call' (interpellation) from the self-aware (conscientised) victims (oppressed within a system or excluded from it) to those with an ethical conscience within the system. These two groups work together, identifying or denouncing what is wrong and constructing an alternative social reality - that is, on a shared project of Liberation. As Martín-Baró and Montero have both stressed, ultimately this implies the liberation of the oppressors too.

Realismo Crítico

Martín-Baró established a distinctive position on the role of theory, one that is broadly followed by those working within this paradigm.

It shouldn't be theories that define the problems of our situation, but rather the problems that demand, and so to speak, select, their own theorisation.

(Martín-Baró, 1998b: p.314)

Theory therefore has a supportive but not a fundamental role, as a kind of scaffolding to guide action. This orientation he called 'realismo-crítico' in contrast to the more usual approach which he called 'idealismo-metodológico'.

However, this is not a naïve realism: the nature of the social reality can be difficult to apprehend, not just for the people, but for psychology itself. It is therefore necessary to de-ideologise reality, to peel off the layers of ideology (for Martín-Baró the disguised exercise of power) that individualise and naturalise phenomena such as the fatalism of Latin American societies (Martín-Baró, 1987).

The direction of travel sounds like that of grounded theory approaches to qualitative research, where theory is meticulously built up from the ground of information collected by the researcher. The differences are firstly in a dialectical relationship between reality and theory - for Martín-Baró there are certain meta-

theoretical suppositions that precede the elaboration of theory, and ideally the theory interacts through action with the reality. Secondly, the theory has a role of de-ideologising reality - there is a critical thrust missing from phenomenological orientations such as grounded theory or 4th generation evaluation.

A social orientation

Throughout the work of those using PSL as an orienting vision, there is a thorough critique of the individualism found so strongly in North American (and indeed in British) psychology. Martín-Baró's two wonderful social psychology text books (Martín-Baró, 1983, 1989b) are perhaps the most sustained, and thorough and engaged critique. This social or societal orientation is also historical, with a constant sense of how things got to be the way they are, and how this history is ever present in the subjectivity of the people. PSL practitioners have drawn on a variety of approaches here: Marxism, psychoanalysis, Vygotskian theory, social representations and social constructionism). But the social orientation is not just a matter of theory. PSL is a moral project, and this tends to distinguish it from the new paradigm approaches of the 80s, and much of the 'critical psychology' of the 90s. The commitment after all is to liberation.

There are several aspects to this thoroughly social version of psychology. The recognition of the conflictual nature of society and the omnipresence of power is fundamental; there are distinct social interests that give rise to conflict. Power is to be understood not just on an interpersonal basis but in terms of its organisation in society. Conflict and power have both economic and ideological dimensions, the latter analysable using concepts from psychology.

Taken directly from liberation theology is the **preferential option for the oppressed majorities**. (Originally 'preferential option for the poor' (Gutiérrez, 1997)). Psychology has to give up its obsession (idolatry) with its internal problems and focus on serving the needs of the popular majorities: it is their real problems, not

those that preoccupy people elsewhere that should be the primary object of Latin American psychologists' attention. In that their need depends on their liberation from the social structures that keep them oppressed, then that has to focus the concern and effort of psychology (Martín-Baró, 1996a). The perspective and knowledge of the oppressed both provides content to psychology and sets a criterion for the 'practical truth' of psychology's offerings.

Methodological eclecticism

Those working with a PSL orientation combine traditional techniques (e.g. surveys, use of official statistics) with new paradigm approaches (e.g. social representations, qualitative enquiry, collaborative photography, and drama), as well as 'ideology critique' that draws on Foucauldian and related approaches. There is, however an emphasis on both the Freirean commitment to reflection-action-reflection, and to action research. Here is another contrast with the 'critical' psychology practised in Europe.

Three areas of application

PSL could be said to be applied in three main domains. These, however do overlap considerably, so, for example a piece of work recognisable as community psychology might also have a concern with state violence and impunity and with a broader socio-political analysis (Cordero, 1997; Dobles, 1994).

Community Social Psychology

Community psychology in Latin America has differed from that in the other America (Montero, 1996; Quintal de Freitas, 2000; Sánchez & Wiesenfeld, 1991). Its roots are in social psychology, and there is less emphasis on the clinical and mental health tradition (one of the North American roots of the discipline). There has been an orientation to work with poor communities in settings as diverse as the poor urban districts of Caracas, San Juan or Sao Paulo, or rural squatter colonies in Costa

Rica, or Mexico. Emphasis varies, but in general the psychologist is seen as a resource for the community, offering expertise in investigation, an understanding of leadership and organisation and group dynamics, and knowledge of the system (for example when trying to obtain resources). The themes of conscientisation (Freire) and the use of social science investigative methods (Fals-Borda) are typical, as is the effort to understand local struggle and self-liberation within a wider societal and global perspective.

Montero (1991: 35) suggests that community social psychology provides a methodological and empirical base for the psychology of liberation while participatory action research, dependency theory and popular education together with the critical revision of traditional psychology, provide the theoretical support.

Community social psychology is taught at universities and / or practised in Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Argentina. A variety of social issues is tackled, including for example health promotion, economic development and anti-poverty programmes, housing, leadership development at the community level, community development, as well as the development of community intervention and support in the fields of disability, mental health and drug use.

In general a transformational approach is either employed or aspired to. In some cases the psychological specificity can risk being lost, although this matter has been addressed within the field. Quintal de Freitas (1994) for example, defines community social psychology as a position and practice that both defends the specificity of psychological practice, and the belief in socio-historical determination of social phenomena . Setting out to demystify/de-ideologize difficulties faced by people (typically naturalised and psychologised), it employs both the use of psychological techniques already existing in psychology and also the creation of new ones in a joint process of participation with the people concerned. (Presumably this professional specificity would only come into play once there has been a commitment

to and analysis of the socio-historical nature of social problems. Otherwise there is the strong possibility of just 'doing traditional psychology in community settings').

Work with victims of state oppression (disappearances, genocide)

Latin America has been marked by oppressive regimes, military conflicts and the repression of liberation movements. There are still reports of murders of activists (e.g. in Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil, and especially in Colombia), the clearance of peasants from prime land (Colombia), and other abuses. The experience has been diverse in scale and intensity, but the psychosocial experiences in countries as different as the Southern Cone, the Andean countries and Central America have been in many ways similar. To give some idea of the scale of the trauma, there were some 20,000 murders by the Argentinian junta (Hollander, 1997), 3,000 in Chile (Reuters, 2003), and more than 200,000 by the Guatemalan state (CEH, 1999). There have been several threads to the work here with survivors and those close to the victims of torture, disappearance and murder. For Martín-Baró himself, living in the 'limit situation' of the El Salvador conflict (Harris, 1990) political violence was a key practical and theoretical concern (Dobles, 1993; Martín-Baró, 2003, 2000).

An outstanding example of this is found in the work of ILAS, the Instituto Latinoamericano de Salud Mental y Derechos Humanos (Latin American Institute of Mental Health and Human Rights), a non governmental organisation working on the mental health of people affected directly as a result of the violations of human rights during the military regime in Chile, 1973-1990 (ILAS, 2003). Extensive research was carried out to inform the work, covering violations of human rights, their effects on people in particular and also on society in general. ILAS is also active in the establishment and supervision of other mental health teams which work with people who have experienced situations of political violence, both nationally and internationally, for example in Angola (Agger & Buus Jensen, 1996; ILAS, 2003). Meanwhile, in Chile the discussions about the social, subjective and political

implications of seventeen years of authoritarian government still continue. The concern for social reparation to the victims is still important, with the question of national unity and reconstruction a theme in Chilean mental health, with a political and public dimension.

In the work of ILAS and other teams, for example the psychosocial support team for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires (Hollander, 1997) and in the AVRE organisation in Colombia (Castaño & López, 1994), there is emphasis on making the suffering a social, shared, thing, rather than secret distress, and on again taking up active social roles. Agger and Buus Jensen (1996: 105) describe this as de-privatization. In the course of their work, the Buenos Aires group has produced evidence of the healing power of political activism (cited by Hollander, p. 143).

Among the nine objectives by which Lira and Weinstein (2000) defined the ILAS therapeutic model, the following four indicate the highly social and societal orientation, going beyond the more usual models of working with posttraumatic disorder:

- Linking of the traumatic experience to existential meanings in the life of the person,
- Regaining of role as a social being,
- Restructuring of the (person's) existential project: continuity between past, present and future
- Regaining of collective ties.

Our therapeutic focus gives decisive importance to the existential restructuring of the existential project which has been found to be directly associated with recovery (recuperación) of an active social role. Psychotherapy then, has to be accompanied by conditions that help the [person] to regain the former sense of their life, or that permit, in paradoxical contradiction to the intentions of the torturer, the personal growth and development of the person who was victim.

Lira and Weinstein, 1990: 382.

Lira and Weinstein also emphasise the need of the therapist to be able to interpret experiences sociopolitically, in order that the affected person can in

answering the questions 'why torture? and why me?' discover the rationality in a situation so often characterised by arbitrariness and confusion.

The theme of recovering memories, of what happened, and of those who have been taken away is common to this and other work. This emphasis is important both in terms of the general emphasis in liberatory praxis on the role of collective memory as a political and social resource, but also because of the officially sanctioned denial of what happened. In Guatemala, the disinterring of the murdered, identifying them, and commemorating what happened, for example through traditional Maya ceremonies, is of key importance, with several interdisciplinary projects under way.

A further dimension to all this has been work to prosecute and end the impunity of those responsible, with psychologists working as a resource to lawyers, forensic archeologists, and others as well as community members (Flores et al., 2002; Lira, 2000; Reza, undated). The international PSL congresses have been important places to exchange experiences (for example between those working in El Salvador and Guatemala).

The therapeutic approach meets a community psychological one in work on delivering effective intervention to communities without access to mental health professionals (Sveaass, 2000).

Social Analysis

Given the emphasis on a macrosocial viewpoint, intimately linked to human subjectivity, it is no surprise that psychologists working within the PSL approach have explored social analysis more broadly.

A large part of Martín Baró's work was on Salvadorean public opinion (Martín-Baró, 1989a). Although this used conventional methods it had a clear purpose of making explicit what the people thought, both for them and for those outside the country. As such the work was a form of counter-propaganda, undermining many of

the arguments used to justify continued support for the government. It was also an independent source of information for peace activists outside the country, especially in the USA. The University Institute of Public Opinion, IUDOP, which he established, still functions and continues this work 'so that the citizens see themselves as themselves, and generate the changes that are still necessary in a society divided by poverty and violence' (IUDOP, 2003).

Other psychologists working with a PSL perspective have carried out various socio-psychological-political analyses of the social realities confronting their countries. At the 2002 congress for example, there were analyses of the use of terror by the Colombian paramilitaries and its effects on family life and subjectivity, the use of psychological warfare in the Guatemalan counter-insurgency and genocide, and the Bush regime's use of propaganda after the twin towers attack.

Other work has focussed on matters such as child development under conditions of institutionalised violence, the process of urbanisation, rural issues, and the new social movements in the region (Cordero, 1997; Gaborit, undated; J.J.. Vazquez, 2000).

There has been a variety of new developments in the region, such as the erosion of impunity, the emergence of new social movements and actors, the election of more progressive governments or at least of increasing numbers of progressive parliamentarians, together with the intensification of Washington's economic and military interference. These appear to be leading to an increasing interest in political and social commentary, and to the search for new means of intervening in the public sphere (Dobles, 2003).

So, there is no unified approach that could be called 'Liberation Social Psychology', but there is a family of approaches that fit the title and show sufficient use and development of the fundamental ideas to allow use of the term.

Challenges

Despite its broader relevance to work with marginalised populations, and the stature of its leading practitioners, Liberation Social Psychology is little known outside Latin America, and even there it is very much a minority tendency. It has a tendency to continually restate its distinctive approach, perhaps at the expense of further development. At the same time there is what Montero (personal communication, 2002) has identified as a continual risk of a drift to mere activism, or the use of liberatory language to cover uncritical repeated practices where abuse and exploitation return. Finally, like any progressive social movement, it truly faces an enormous task in nourishing both opposition to the empire of capitalist exploitation and domination, and developing viable support systems, both for itself as well as with and for the marginalised and oppressed.

PSL, then, is a minority interest with credence only in certain locations. The annual conferences attract several hundred people, many of them local: the travel costs are prohibitive for most people. There is little continuity of the network between events, although the fifth 2002 congress did focus to some extent on this problem. There is a small network of enthusiasts some of whom do have a respected status in the discipline.

The quality of debate is high, although there is not a great deal of original new work being done. Tod Sloan (personal communication, 2002) makes the comparison with critical psychology:

In general, Latin American academics have few resources and little time for keeping up with theory in the way British progressives seem to do. In the UK, there often seems to be too much theory and in Latin America too little.

Personal communication, 2002.

While, politically speaking there are some promising openings in the region, there are enormous forces working against initiatives such as these. The continued economic problems of the region and the continued dominance and interference by the USA make for a real limit on the scope for the liberation of those excluded from capitalism's party.

The interests of academics and professionals are not always the same as those of the oppressed sectors, and the linkage between progressive social psychologists and other progressive movements is not strong. The fourth 2001 conference in Guatemala saw an impressive attempt to link with and involve popular social movements from Guatemala and beyond, providing a critical edge for debate and clarification. There was an impressive talk by Horacio Martins de Carvalho from the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) which covered the nature of the struggle for social justice, land occupations and the new democratic communities that have arisen, together with the cultural practices that have evolved to support the struggle. This effectively framed the conference within the problematic of what psychology can contribute, and what kind of psychological knowledge and practice is appropriate. But the objective differences between the professional middle class and the excluded is a real challenge to overcome - one that is not unique to Latin America (Stewart, 2000).

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