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Bridging the Personal and the Political: Practices for a Liberation Psychology

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In the Irish context, legacies of colonialism, the Northern Ireland conflict situation, and the strength of community and women's liberation movements all provide rich resources for understanding the processes involved in both oppression and liberation. This paper draws on the theoretical and research literature and on Irish experiences to develop an understanding of some of the processes and practices that aid in liberation. The research is grounded in diverse writings on oppression and liberation, which include writings on colonialism (E. Duran & B. Duran, 1995; F. Fanon, 1967; V. Kenny, 1985, L. Maracle, 1996), feminist psychology (J. B. Miller, 1986; S. Wilkinson, 1996), liberation psychology (H. A. Bulhan, 1985; L. Comas-Díaz, M. B. Lykes, & R. D. Alarcon, 1998; I. Martín-Baró, 1994; Starhawk, 1987), and psychological aspects of racism (b. hooks, 1993; A. Mama, 1995; R. J. Watts, D. M. Griffith, & J. Abdul-Adil, 1999), homophobia (A. R. D'Augelli & C. J. Patterson, 1995), poverty (K. O'Neill, 1992), and other dimensions of oppression.

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The concerns of liberation psychology are obviously compatible with those of community psychology, which has been engaged with oppression, inequality, and social justice issues since its foundation (Albee, Joffe, & Dusenbury, 1988; Bennett et al., 1966; Rapaport, 1977). Both focus on social conditions, particularly oppressive social conditions, as a source of psychological problems, and both emphasize empowerment and social transformation as goals of intervention. However, critical discussions of models in community psychology, including empowerment theory, have expressed two concerns that may be addressed by liberation psychology. One concern is that community psychology interventions still tend to be focused at the individual level and retain some of the individualistic assumptions of traditional psychologies (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997; Riger, 1993; Zimmerman, 1990). The other concern is that models and interventions focus on the micro and meso levels of the ecology, and do not adequately address the macro or structural level of the ecology (Gesten & Jason, 1987; Joffe & Albee, 1988; Perkins, 1995; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997; Sarason, 1984).

A central theme of liberation psychology is the need to focus on the collective rather than the individual, a point made clearly by Bulhan (1985), a relatively early writer on the psychology of oppression and liberation. Bulhan writes:

> A psychology tailored to the needs of the oppressed would give primacy to the attainment of "collective liberty" and, since such liberty is attained only by collectives, would emphasize how best to further the consciousness and organized action of the collective. (p. 259)

It is also captured by feminist psychologist Starhawk (1987):

> A psychology of liberation is one whose primary focus is the communities we come from and create. Our collective history is as important as our individual history. A liberation psychology is more concerned with how structures of power shape and bind us than with the particular events of our individual

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> childhoods. . . . a liberation psychology is more concerned with ways of creating communal healing and collective change. (p. 23)

Liberation psychology thus focuses on oppression and liberation at the structural level as well as at the level of individual lives. As Martín-Baró (1994) argues, the root causes of oppression lie in the structures—political, economic, and cultural—and ideologies that underlie oppressive social conditions. These structures and ideologies create the everyday experiences of violence, poverty, stress, discrimination, and prejudice that are manifestations of oppression. Liberation will therefore ultimately involve transformation of oppressive social structures, which can only occur through collective action. One of the aims of liberation psychology is to develop an understanding of the role of psychology and of the psychologist in social transformation (Comas-Díaz, Lykes, & Alarcon, 1998; Martín-Baró, 1994).

Another important element of liberation psychology is the understanding of internalized oppression as an important element in maintaining oppression, and of the essential interlinkage between the social conditions of oppression and the psychological patterns associated with oppression. Psychological patterns such as sense of inferiority or helplessness that are associated with oppression clearly have their origins in social conditions of powerlessness and degradation. Such psychological patterns act as a barrier to action and are part of what maintains oppression. Thus liberation must involve transformation of the psychological patterns as well as the social conditions associated with oppression. Liberation, as Martín-Baró points out, "involves breaking the chains of personal oppression as much as the chains of social oppression" (p. 27).

Liberation psychology requires, then, an analysis of the social conditions in which people live their lives, an understanding of internalized oppression, and a set of practices or interventions that will transform psychological and social patterns associated with oppression. It is grounded in the specific experiences of the group or context in which it is developed, and thus the analysis offered by a liberation psychology, and the processes and practices that facilitate liberation, will vary from one context to the next. There can be an Irish liberation psychology, a Puerto Rican liberation psychology, a black liberation psychology, a liberation psychology for lesbians and gay men, and so forth. Liberation psychology also actively engages with diversity, which is a theme common to both liberation psychology and community psychology (Bulhan, 1985; Comas-Díaz et al., 1998; Serrano-García & Bond, 1994; Trickett, 1996). Oppression is structured differently for diverse groups at the three levels of the ecology, it is experienced differently both within and between diverse groups, and diverse groups have developed different strategies for transformation.

Comas-Díaz et al. (1998) highlight a further feature of liberation psychology, which is that the liberation psychologist *accompanies* those living in conditions of oppression, where they define "accompany" as "standing alongside people, working with them, seeking to develop collaborative relations that recognize power inequities" (p. 779). This element of praxis was emphasized by Martín-Baró (1994), who drew on liberation theology and the writings of Freire (1993) to develop a new praxis for psychologists. He argued that psychologists should be critical of working with professionals and experts in positions of power and instead work with the people, allowing them to develop their own critical consciousness and develop their own strategies for transformation.

Concepts such as critical consciousness and accompaniment illustrate another feature of liberation psychology, which is that it offers a different kind of language and a different conceptual framework for psychology. For example Martín-Baró (1994) writes of "the recovery of historical memory," Comas-Díaz et al. (1998) write of "silence" and "confusion," Starhawk (1987) has developed a range of concepts such as "censor" and "vibes-watcher," and Moane (2000) has written of "niches of resistance." Focusing on oppression and liberation also places greater emphasis on areas such as spirituality (hooks, 1993; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Zappone, 1991), sexuality (Jackson, 1998), and creativity (Miller, 1986), and places them in a new light by illustrating their role at the individual, collective, and structural levels in oppression and liberation. Many writers on oppression, for example, discuss the control and suppression of these three areas at the structural level through the institutions of religion, culture, and law (Young, 1990). This in turn has an impact on the capacities for self-expression, solidarity, and support at the communal and individual levels. This framework is clearly different in emphasis and scope from traditional "psychology of" approaches to spirituality, sexuality, and creativity.

This paper aims to further the development of liberation psychology in three ways. First it offers a social analysis that can provide a clear model for

understanding the social conditions associated with oppression. Secondly, it identifies some of the psychological patterns associated with internalized oppression. Thirdly, it develops a fuller understanding of the processes involved in transforming oppressive psychological and social patterns. The social analysis was developed in the context of teaching Psychology of Women, where the need for a structural analysis to provide an integrating framework for theory and research became apparent. It was further developed through a review of writings in feminism and colonialism which also provided insights into psychological patterns associated with oppression. An understanding of the processes involved in taking action was based on the theoretical analysis and on the experiences of community development and of those involved in the Irish women's liberation movement.

This analysis was developed in an Irish context, which involves a complex interplay of colonial and postcolonial legacies. Ireland was systematically colonized by the British over a period of 400 years, involving military campaigns, seizure of land and appropriation of wealth, exclusion from political power, attempted erasure of language and culture, and the production by the colonizers of an ideology that emphasized the inferiority of the natives and superiority of the colonizers (Curtis, 1994). Since 1921, the island has been partitioned into the Republic of Ireland, which established political independence from Britain, and Northern Ireland, which remained in a union with Britain. Northern Ireland has remained a site of conflict since, resulting in 30 years of armed conflict (Cairns & Darby, 1998). The postcolonial Irish Republic remained both male dominated and Catholic Church dominated until recent unprecedented economic developments have resulted in massive social change. Both historically and currently, social and political movements have been constantly active, resulting in strong women's movements and community development movements (Connolly, 1996; Curtis, 1994; Cullen, 1994; Devaney, Mulholland, & Willoughby, 1994). These elements provide the context for the present analysis.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS

The aim of social analysis is to identify the social conditions associated with oppression and the ways in which these conditions are structured in society as a whole. The social analysis presented here draws from research on colonialism and patriarchy, which are seen as hierarchical systems. An ecological model is used to provide a framework in which to understand the impact of oppressive social conditions. The value of the ecological model is that it offers a way of bridging the psychological and the sociological through identifying three major levels of analysis, the micro level of day-to-day settings, the meso level of communities and organizations, and the macro level of social structures and ideology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kelly, 1986; Trickett, 1996). An understanding of oppression involves identifying patterns at the macro level that are related to oppression, and then considering their manifestations in the communities (meso level) and day-to-day settings (micro level) of people's lives. This can then provide the basis for understanding their psychological impact and idenfitying practices for transformation.

Identifying oppressive patterns at the macro level has traditionally been the task of political and social theory, and indeed many writers have developed complex and sophisticated understandings of the social bases of oppression (Bartky, 1990; Young, 1990). What is needed here, however, is a simple framework that enables psychologists to move easily from the macro to the micro level, and vice versa, and which can provide the basis for psychological understanding. This analysis identified six patterns at the macro level that were thought to be relevant from a liberation psychology perspective. They are: violence; political exclusion; economic exploitation; control of sexuality; cultural control and fragmentation. These patterns have been referred to frequently in writings on oppression, whether from the viewpoint of colonialism (Fanon, 1967), race (hooks, 1993), gender (Jackson & Jones, 1998), class (O'Neill, 1992; Walkerdine, 1996), sexual orientation (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995), or other dimensions of oppression (Bulhan, 1985).

In Table I these patterns are illustrated with historical examples from colonialism in the Irish context and contemporary examples from feminist research in North America and Europe. Obviously examples from other contexts such as South Africa and Latin America could also be used. These patterns are described as mechanisms of control because they have the effect of maintaining domination by concentrating power and resources at the top of the hierarchy (Bulhan, 1985; Jackson & Jones, 1998; Walby, 1997). They keep those at the bottom of the hierarchy subordinate both by posing barriers to change and also through the process of internalized oppression (Fanon, 1967; Miller, 1986). There has been considerable research on these six patterns in the context of women and

Table I. Six Mechanisms of Control Found in Colonialism and Patriarchy

Mechanism	Colonialism	Patriarchy
Violence	Military and police violence	Battery
		Rape
		Harassment
Political exclusion	No voting rights	Access to voting
	Restrictions on assembly	Attitudes
Economic exploitation	Seizure of land	Ownership of wealth
	Low paid labor	Low/unpaid labor
	Charges/taxes	
Control of sexuality	Control of marriage	Marriage laws
	Enforced motherhood	Birth control
Cultural control	Control of education	Erasure from history
	Stereotypes	Media images
Fragmentation	Enforced migration	Tokenism
		Competition

racial minorities in particular. This research cannot be cited in detail here, but reference will be made to specific examples from feminist research on gender.

Almost all situations of oppression involve the threat or the actuality of *violence*, as illustrated by both police and social research showing consistently higher levels of physical violence experienced by oppressed and minority groups (Peters & Wolper, 1995). Violence may range from systematic state and police violence through physical assaults to physical and verbal harassment of various kinds. Rape and sexual assault can be included here, as well as systematic and intentional intimidation, and assault and battery. Violence is structured at the macro level in that agencies charged with the prevention, detection, and punishment of crimes of violence often fail to discharge their duty in the case of violence against minority and oppressed groups. In the case of women, for example, feminist research has consistently shown that police agents fail to respond to calls for help, show suspicion toward the victim of violence, and fail to invest resources in the apprehension of perpetrators. There are further barriers posed by the legal and judicial systems, ranging from the nature of the laws governing violence against women to the attitudes of jurors and judges. Health and social service professionals also fail to offer support to victims of violence, often doubting their allegations and implying that they are to blame (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996).

These examples highlight some of the structural issues related to the patterns of violence. It is clear that violence is socially patterned and sometimes sanctioned by public attitudes (including racism and sexism) as well as by legal and other systems of society. These macro level patterns are concretely manifested in the day-to-day lives of members of minority or oppressed groups in the actual experience or the threat of violence. The actual experience of violence or harassment obviously has psychological consequences, which include fear and anxiety, low self-esteem, and isolation (Rollins, 1996). In addition, many of those belonging to oppressed groups experience fear of violence and restrict their lives accordingly. This has been well documented in the case of women, where research shows that up to 80% of women worry about sexual assault, and avoid certain activities out of fear of sexual assault (Rollins, 1996).

The example of violence illustrates that patterns associated with oppression are socially structured at the macro level, manifest themselves in the day-to-day lives of the oppressed, and can be associated with specific psychological patterns. Obviously diversity must be acknowledged here (Trickett, 1996). The structuring of violence, the experience of violence, and the responses to violence will vary considerably by social status, as exemplified by the differences between Black men and White men, or between women with disabilities and able-bodied women (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996; Peters & Wolper, 1995; Watts et al., 1999).

In the case of *political exclusion*, structural factors in an extreme form may involve depriving people of the vote. There are also more subtle forms of political exclusion involving attitudes and expectations about the oppressed group and their capacity for political activity. The exclusion of women and minorities from political life is evident in their absence or presence in very low numbers at all levels of the political system from local to national, as well as their

scarcity in positions of power in health, education and social services, judicial and legal systems, business, and art and culture (Jackson & Jones, 1998; Rollins, 1996; Walby, 1997). Exclusion from political life manifests itself at the meso and micro levels in a variety of ways, of which neglect and lack of resources such as transport, health, and educational facilities are the most obvious. Decision-making agendas tend to ignore the concerns of women and minorities, and indeed often override them, imposing decisions on communities and individuals against their will. Frustration, anger, and feelings of powerlessness are obvious reactions to such exclusion.

Economic exploitation again can be understood in terms of its structural patterns and its day-to-day manifestations. Research in this area consistently shows that women and minorities are more often in poverty, and are unemployed. When employed they are more often found in temporary, insecure, and low-paying jobs, and are more often found near the bottom of organizational hierarchies (Walby, 1997). A variety of factors ranging from lack of educational and training facilities to biases in evaluation present barriers to upward mobility in the labor market generally or even within an organization. At the day-to-day or micro level, these patterns are manifested in job characteristics, which include lack of training or promotional opportunities, performance of routine and repetitive work, lack of material resources, and insecurity. Psychological patterns associated with economic exploitation include insecurity, stress and anxiety, and low self-worth.

Control of sexuality involves the regulation of sexuality along with the exploitation of sexual and reproductive capacities either commercially or otherwise. Laws regulating heterosexual and homosexual relations, abortion, and birth control are examples of regulation, whereas prostitution provides an obvious example of exploitation, as does the use of sexually attractive models in advertising and the fashion industry. Attitudes and discourse pertaining to sexual relations, particularly those allowable between dominant and subordinate groups, obviously play a vital role in the regulation of sexuality (Jackson, 1998). Control of sexuality obviously has an impact on experiences of sexuality, the body, childrearing, and parenthood.

Cultural control involves the many ways in which oppressed people are deprived of a voice and excluded and marginalized through control of mass media and culture generally. At the structural level this is evident in the ownership and funding of media, publishing houses, and other institutions of media and culture, as well as in the absence of women and minorities from positions of power in these institutions. Women and minorities are absent or present in much smaller numbers proportionately in culture generally. Where they are present they may be represented by false and demeaning stereotypes, often placed in subordinate positions in culture and mass media and rarely represented as strong, independent, powerful, or competent (hooks, 1993; Ussher, 1997). Obviously culture plays a very important role in areas such as the construction of self and identity, feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, the capacity for self-expression, imagination, and the sense of belonging in society.

The sixth pattern, *fragmentation*, refers to various ways in which oppressed people are divided among themselves. These divisions arise from differences within oppressed groups as well as from pressures placed on them. For example the labor force patterns referred to above result in greater levels of temporary employment and unemployment, breaking up ties created through work (Walby, 1997). Tokenism, where members of the oppressed group are promoted into positions of power, creates competition among the oppressed (Rollins, 1996). Patterns of migration is another example of an experience that creates fragmentation—people leave their communities and families break up. The absence of shared cultural traditions through erasure of history and culture is another source of fragmentation. Fragmentation creates isolation and divisions, and inhibits unity among the oppressed.

Identifying these six patterns illustrates the important point that there are enormous societal pressures operating on oppressed groups. Any one of these patterns creates obvious difficulties; taken as a whole, and indeed as an interconnected whole, they obviously create considerable difficulties in the lives of those who are oppressed. These difficulties have been written about extensively both by social commentators and by those who have experienced these conditions (Bulhan, 1985; Duran & Duran, 1995; Fanon, 1967; Freire, 1993; hooks, 1993; Kenny, 1985; Miller, 1986). It is also clear that these patterns can create considerable psychological problems for those who are oppressed, and also create problems in organizing together to try and change social conditions.

Obviously not all individuals belonging to an oppressed or minority group experience all of these patterns in the same way, or respond to these patterns similarly. Many individuals have multiple experiences of oppression, or multiple group identities, and may

also be implicated in oppression themselves. As they move through different settings in their lives, they may thus move from relative disadvantage to relative advantage, or may be targets of oppression in one context, for example as a victim of violence or harassment, and agents of oppression in another, for example through being perpetrators of violence.

It is also clear that those who live their lives in ecologies marked by oppression also devote considerable effort to constructing niches, contexts, or ecologies that provide protection against oppression and opportunities for resistance to the forces of oppression, and also for pride, self-expression, and connection with others. Oppression is thus not seen as involving unmitigated domination by one group and unmitigated subordination by another where the subordinate group is constantly subjected to overwhelming social forces. However, the patterns described here do create considerable difficulties for individuals through the practical difficulties of day-to-day life, by their impact on psychological functioning, and by the difficulties they create for bringing about change.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PATTERNS ASSOCIATED WITH OPPRESSION: INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

The writings in feminism and colonialism cited above describe a range of negative psychological patterns associated with oppression, while also acknowledging the psychological strengths or resources associated with oppression. Oppressive social conditions can have an impact not just on self and identity, which have received considerable attention, but on many other areas of psychological functioning. Psychological patterns may be directly linked to mechanisms of control. For example violence can be associated with fear, political exclusion with helplessness and frustration, economic exploitation with insecurity and worry, and sexual exploitation with shame and guilt. Cultural control obviously has a direct impact on consciousness in a variety of ways, and fragmentation can produce a sense of isolation.

Obviously psychological patterns associated with oppression will vary just as the social patterns associated with oppression vary. It may also be recalled here that individuals and groups are not passive recipients of the patterns associated with oppression, and furthermore, each individual negotiates personhood in relation to a range of social forces. In her writings about racism in the British context, Mama (1995) reminds us of this point:

> Racism can be seen as texturing subjectivity rather than determining black social and emotional life. Put another way, race is only ever one among many dimensions of subjectivity and it never constitutes the totality of an individual's internal life. Even where racial contradictions feature a great deal in people's history and experience, the fact they are responded to by personal change means that they are not an omnipresent force acting on passive victims. (p. 111–112)

Patterns that were frequently identified in writings on oppression include first of all restrictions, tension and ambivalence in a variety of areas, including sexuality, spirituality, and creativity, which are associated with control and regulation in these areas. A second set of themes relates to the area of self and identity, where sense of inferiority or lack of self-worth and self-doubt are commonly identified. Thirdly, oppression is associated with a variety of very strong although often unpleasant emotions, particularly fear, hopelessness, anger, and shame. A fourth commonly recurring theme is the difficulties in relationships arising from misplaced anger (horizontal hostility) distrust, and competition (Moane, 1999).

These themes emerge both in personal and autobiographical writings by those who have experienced oppression and in the writings of those working on behalf of oppressed individuals or groups (Bulhan, 1985; Fanon, 1967; Freire, 1993; hooks, 1993; Maracle, 1996; Miller, 1986). The point here is not to make generalizations about individuals or groups, but to note that some of these patterns may be found in individuals and groups who experience oppression, and that conversely, where these patterns are present in an individual or group they may be linked to social patterns described above. For some individuals, the ultimate outcome of oppression, as many writers emphasize, is vulnerability to psychological distress and madness, and to alcohol, tranquilizer, and drug abuse (Duran & Duran, 1995; Fanon, 1967; hooks, 1993; O'Neill, 1992).

In reviewing these psychological patterns it is apparent that they may create difficulties for those who are oppressed to organize together and take action on their own behalf. Barriers to liberation arise not just from the social conditions of oppression but also from the psychological patterns, especially those which undermine self-confidence and self-esteem, and create problems in groups and communities. As hooks (1993) writes: "when wounded individuals come together in groups to make change our collective struggle is often undermined by all

that has not been dealt with emotionally" (p. 5). One of the important processes in attaining liberation, therefore, is to counteract or transform the negative psychological patterns associated with liberation. Interventions that address not just psychological distress but also other patterns that act as barriers to taking effective action to bring about change can be important tools for a community psychology of liberation.

Many writers on oppression and liberation also identify strengths such as generosity, courage, perseverance, and solidarity that develop in oppressive conditions, and particularly out of resistance to oppression (Martín-Baró, 1994; Miller, 1986). Referring to these strengths as "the virtues of our peoples," Martín-Baró writes:

> Going no further than my own people, the people of El Salvador, current history confirms, day by day, their uncompromising solidarity with the suffering, their ability to deliver and to sacrifice for the collective good, their tremendous faith in the human capacity to change the world, their hope for a tomorrow that keeps being violently denied to them. (p. 31)

These strengths are often highly valued by individuals and groups themselves. Internalized oppression is acknowledged as creating psychological difficulties in day-to-day lives, in interpersonal relationships, and in organizing to bring about change, but there is also a recognition and a valuing of qualities such as the courage, ingenuity, and solidarity that develop from resisting oppression and from creating community and culture. Transformation of internalized oppression thus involves not just diminishing negative patterns but also building on strengths.

PROCESSES AND PRACTICES INVOLVED IN LIBERATION

So far it has been argued that oppression is associated with mechanisms of control that manifest themselves at the macro, meso, and micro levels of the ecology and that have an impact on psychological functioning. This has provided a social analysis and an understanding of internalized oppression. The third element in the analysis is an understanding of the processes and practices involved in bringing about change and moving toward liberation. It is part of the understanding of liberation psychology that this will involve transforming the psychological damage associated with oppression and empowering people to work collectively toward bringing about change at the three levels identified in the ecological model. Three levels of intervention are involved here: facilitating personal development aimed at transforming patterns of internalized oppression and building strengths; enabling individuals to work together in groups and communities; and empowering individuals and groups to take action to bring about change.

A number of models of change incorporating different levels have been developed in the context of feminist and community psychology. For example Morrow and Hawxhurst (1998) present a model for use in therapy outlining three dimensions of empowerment: personal, interpersonal, and sociopolitical, and describe interventions addressed to each dimension. Discussions of empowerment also include different levels of intervention—Speer and Hughes (1995) identify the individual, the organization, and the community levels, whereas Perkins (1995) discusses the community, the organizational, and the societal levels. In developing interventions with African American young men, Watts et al. (1995) aim to integrate personal, community, and sociopolitical development. These writers and others (Zimmerman, 1990) emphasize the need to move beyond the individualized focus of many approaches to empowerment and integrate community and sociopolitical levels of analysis.

It may be important to acknowledge however that individuals and groups may not be readily able to engage with the sociopolitical level of change until they have built up resources, skills, and experiences. Such a developmental view of empowerment was proposed by Kieffer (1984), and is compatible with Freire's understanding of liberation (Freire, 1993), where he argues that the oppressed begin taking action within the confines of their "limit-situation," through dialogue and action develop a broader analysis, and from there engage in a broader arena and ultimately with social structures. The developmental view, and the emphasis on agency in liberation psychology, highlights the importance of allowing groups to develop their own strategies for action, ones which suit their capacities and interests, and which give them a sense of control and agency. Such a view of change is also proposed at the individual level by the Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska & Diclemente 1992), which poses five stages of change, and at the community level by Oetting, Donnermeyer, Edwards, Kelly, and Beauvais (1995), who have identified nine stages in community readiness for change.

This discussion will focus on three levels of change, which may be illustrated by the following quotes from interviews with women involved in the

Irish women's liberation movement. These interviews indicated that women first focused on the level of personal development, then moved to the group level, and then sought political involvement. At the *personal* level, these quotes illustrate the need to build up confidence:

> I really needed to build up my confidence. I felt really frustrated sitting at meetings and not being able to say anything . . . A few times when I tried to say something I just couldn't get the words out, I just couldn't make my point. . . . Doing an assertiveness course helped me to learn to speak up in groups, get my point across, not be intimidated.

> Even though the women in the group really encouraged me, I really felt overwhelmed by all the things that had to be done, and I was afraid to take things on. . . . I took a personal development course, it was the first time I thought much about myself.

At the *interpersonal* level, the support and encouragement provided by the group context is evident in these quotes:

> It was great to get the sense that you weren't the only one, that other women had the same experience, but what really moved me on was seeing the ways in which so many of the women had made changes in their lives.

> The group made you think about yourself and what you became when you got married and had children. It helps you think about yourself again, discover there are things you can do . . . your whole sense of self is built up as they encouraged you to try things out.

As self-confidence, awareness, and sense of solidarity developed, an interest in *political* change emerged:

> At this point I felt I had the skill and confidence to do something political, to bring about change in a wider way. I was looking for something, somewhere to get involved.

> I felt I was ready to do my bit, be part of the women's movement.

Examples of interventions that target the three levels of change are presented in Table II. The aims of intervention are based on the social analysis and on the understanding of internalized oppression presented above. At the personal level the aims are to transform the negative self-images and sense of inferiority associated with oppression, and to build strengths. The aims of intervention at the interpersonal level are to overcome the isolation that is a common feature of oppression, and develop solidarity and support through making connections with others. The aims of intervention at the political level are to transform the sense of alienation and helplessness associated with oppression and develop a sense of agency and the capacities for action. Taking action in the context of the cycle of liberation is not confined to traditional political activism such as voting and lobbying, but involves a much broader understanding of the role of the individual in change at the micro, meso, and macro levels of the environment.

Table II. Psychological Processes and Practices Associated with Liberation: Examples From the Irish Context

Level	Aims	Practice
Personal	Building strengths	Assertiveness
		Positive images and role models
		Developing a sense of history
		Exploring sexuality
		Cultivating creativity
		Developing spirituality
Interpersonal	Making connections	Support
		Solidarity
		Handling conflict
		Valuing diversity
		Cultivating community
Political	Taking action	Developing analysis
		Exploring options
		Broader understanding of change
		Developing strategies
		Vision

The examples of interventions are based primarily on examples from emancipatory education and community development that have been applied in the context of the Irish women's liberation and community development contexts in the Republic of Ireland (Connolly, 1996; Cullen, 1994; Prendiville, 1995), although they are discussed below in a wider context. In Ireland the community development model, with its emphasis on empowerment and facilitation, is the most widely practised, whereas community psychology is not well developed. This model is also practised in Northern Ireland, and alongside this is what may be called the peace and reconciliation model (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Morrow & Wilson, 1996). Obviously there are many other models relevant to liberation psychology, with civil rights and direct action being obvious examples (Devaney et al., 1994).

The Peace Process has brought a greater emphasis on North–South and cross-community programmes that combine the two models. An interesting outcome of this from the viewpoint of liberation psychology is the challenge to the role of facilitator.

Although the community development model in the Republic has emphasized the role of the facilitator as neutral and impartial (Prendiville, 1995), this model has been challenged in the Northern Irish context. There the facilitator is challenged to situate himself or herself politically and socially, and there have been further discussions of the role of facilitator that are moving it more in the direction of ally and activist (Morrow & Wilson, 1996). This may articulate with the emphasis on accompanying the oppressed in writings on liberation psychology (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998; Martín-Baró, 1994).

At the *personal* level, the focus of intervention can be conceptualized as protecting the psyche from the negative messages associated with oppression, and nourishing the psyche through seeking positive messages, strong role models, and positive images. Sources for positive role models and images may be found in the history of the group, or in the artistic and cultural expressions of the group. In the Irish context, for example, there are many examples of strong and creative women from the history of resistance to colonialism (Ward, 1983). In the areas of sexuality and spirituality there has been much feminist discussion of the ways in which they have been shaped for women and men in oppressive ways, and explorations of more liberating models of sexuality and spirituality (Eisler, 1995; Gadon, 1989). In the case of creativity, the emphasis might be on exploring the works of creativity produced by those who are part of the oppressed groups. Another intervention in the case of creativity includes creative writing and drama workshops that aim to provide a forum in which each individual can explore their own creativity (Cameron, 1995).

At the *interpersonal* level, obtaining support in the many different ways understood by community psychology is vital, along with developing a sense of solidarity with others who are oppressed. Interventions at this level will involve working with groups, and using groupwork techniques that emphasize inclusiveness, support, solidarity, and diversity (Butler & Wintram, 1991; Prendiville, 1995). Emancipatory education models also provide examples of groupwork that emphasizes empowerment and equality of participation (Freire, 1993). The interpersonal level also involves developing a sense of community or of belonging to a larger collective. Resources such as physical spaces or resource centres that are identifiable and accessible and social and cultural events play a crucial role in creating connections and sense of community (hooks, 1993; Maracle, 1996; O'Carroll & Collin, 1995).

At the *political* level taking action builds on developments in the personal and interpersonal areas outlined above. If these developments are in place, intervention can involve a decision-making mode, emphasizing exploring options and strategies for action. Challenging narrow definitions of the "political," and developing a broader definition of "political," is important here because narrow definitions of "political" are themselves alienating and disempowering. Martín-Baró (1994) provides a discussion of political activism that can facilitate a broader understanding of the term. He dismisses the definition of political as "to do with the functioning of the state and its various branches" (p. 53) as too narrow. He concludes that "A behaviour is political when it plays a role in the social confrontation of class and group interests" (p. 55). This opens up a variety of possibilities for taking action—acts as diverse as refusing to cook, changing childrearing practices, speaking out, boycotting, street protests, lobbying, and voting can be considered political, whereas the arenas in which action can be taken include the family, local community, government offices, and other institutions of society. Targets for political action may be based on the six mechanisms of control as they are manifested at the different levels of the ecology. A final element identified in writings on liberation is the development of a vision. Vision can counter the narrow worldview that is part of oppression and offer models for human potential and social organization based on equality. Examples of visionary writings in a feminist context include Lorde (1984), Starhawk (1995), and Eisler (1995).

Although the three levels of personal, interpersonal, and political may be separated for practical purposes, they are obviously interlinked, in that change at each level is linked to changes at the other levels. Building strengths at the personal level, for example through assertiveness training, increases the likelihood of joining a group, which fosters a sense of solidarity and increases the likelihood of taking action. Taking action creates more personal confidence and strength, and strengthens support and solidarity. There is a buildup to a strong sense of personal strength, a sense of connection with others, and a capacity to take action, which are crucial parts of liberation psychology. Evaluations of liberation psychology programmes with community groups in Ireland using this model have clearly shown that the understanding of change as involving all three levels working together is one of the most empowering elements of this approach. In this context the phrase "cycle of liberation" has been used to highlight the

interconnectedness of the three levels. Working the cycle of liberation involves exploring and implementing change at the three levels rather than at one level in isolation from the others. This requires a social analysis and an exploration of internalized oppression in the particular context in which intervention is placed.

THE POTENTIAL OF LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGY

Community psychology offers a range of insights, theoretical models, research models, and models of intervention that aim to improve social conditions. Many of these have the potential to enrich liberation psychology, with action research models and empowerment models being obvious examples. Conversely, liberation psychology offers a number of guiding principles and strategies for intervention that can clearly advance the agenda of community psychology to improve social conditions and bring about social justice.

The central importance of specificity and diversity in community and liberation psychology poses challenges to making generalizations or setting out agendas. The present analysis aimed to identify some guiding principles for liberation psychology, offer a framework for practice and describe examples of practices from the Irish context that illustrate liberation psychology in action in that context. In the course of the exploration, the value of placing oppression and liberation at the centre of attention became apparent, as well as the value of the insights that have been developed explicitly by liberation psychologists. Liberation psychology sees developing critical consciousness and taking action to bring about change as essential, and emphasizes the importance of agency in this process. The role of the psychologist is seen as accompanying the people rather than as an expert.

The importance of activism and of social change in liberation psychology highlights two interconnected areas that need further critical exploration and discussion by community psychologists and by liberation psychologists. One area concerns the role of the psychologist, whereas the other concerns the need for an analysis of social change. The role of the psychologist is addressed quite explicitly by Martín-Baró (1994), who is highly critical of traditional psychologies for many reasons, including individualism and racism. Martín-Baró emphasizes the development of critical consciousness, or "concientización", but he does not fully address the role of activism and alliance, themes that have emerged, as noted above, from the Northern Ireland context in particular.

Liberation psychology takes the view that many negative patterns have their origins in oppressive social conditions, and emphasizes the importance of changing these social conditions. Changing social conditions ultimately involves changing the structural patterns or mechanisms of control that create oppressive social conditions. How such change can happen, what role individuals and groups can play in that, and how to be effective and prevent frustration and despair are some of the questions that need further addressing.

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