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Liberation and Flourishing: Psychological Perspective of Martín-Baró and its Relevance

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Abstract: Ignacio Martín-Baró SJ, along the line of liberation theology, advocated for liberation psychology. For him, the ultimate purpose of the discipline of psychology should be the liberation of the oppressed people. He is critical of the mainstream psychology for its individual orientation and for a powerful few utilizing it as an instrument of oppression. Instead, liberation psychology is to uncover the ideologies that maintain and perpetuate exploitation. Martín-Baró advocates methodological eclecticism and objects political neutrality. The researcher



ought to have a clear option for the poor. However, he attempts to strike a balance when warning against political commitment biasing the researcher's commitment to social reality. Liberation psychology calls for a psychology that is context relevant, sensitive to the social nature of the human being, and far from narrow positivist research strategies.

Keywords: Psychology, Liberation, Social orientation, Methodological eclecticism, Value neutrality, Deideologization, Oppressed majority

Mainstream psychology was developed in Britain and North America. The practice of psychology as a discipline outside these countries are often imitations of mainstream psychology. Nevertheless, there were attempts to originate more context sensitive psychological theories and practice. One such attempt is the liberation psychology originated by Ignacio Martín-Baró SJ in El Salvador, South America. This article will identify the main characteristics of liberation psychology and will explore its implications for the development of psychology as a discipline.

Ignacio Martín-Baró was born in Spain in 1942. He was a social psychologist, philosopher, and a Jesuit priest. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1959 and was sent to El Salvador, where he studied psychology. He did his doctorate in social psychology from the University of Chicago. After his doctorate, he returned to the midst of the violent civil war in El Salvador. Despite death threats, Martín Baró pursued a brilliant teaching and research career at the Central American University (UCA). Finally, in 1989, Salvadoran army soldiers came for the Jesuits in the University campus. Martín Baró was among the six Jesuits and two others who were killed by the army.

In a letter that Martín-Baró wrote a few months before his murder, he refers to the repeated attacks that the UCA Jesuits faced: “we have moved forward and will continue to move forward. These attacks confirm that our activities at the university, which we have conducted peacefully, are challenging our oppressors at their very core.”¹ Since 1976 the paramilitary groups had set off bombs in the UCA library, print shop, and computer center, and in 1980 the Jesuit residence was machine-gunned and later raided four times, dynamited twice and bombed once again in 1983. All of these attacks took place before November 1989 when the military, after having failed to silence the Jesuits, killed them.²

1. Characteristics of Liberation Psychology

Martín-Baró developed liberation psychology in response to the problems within mainstream empirical psychology. Psychological knowledge seemed far away from people’s pressing problems. The discipline heavily relied on certain sections of the population for their studies. That is, for psychological studies, experimenters regularly gathered their sample of participants from the undergraduate student populations the Western Universities. However, it claimed universal valid knowledge applicable to anyone anywhere in the world. It relied on certain restricted methods such as game-like methods of experimental social psychology. Finally, much of the mainstream psychology production remained within the academic community at a highly theoretical level, practically irrelevant to the profound social problems.

To overcome the limitations of mainstream psychology, Martín-Baró proposed liberation psychology, rooted in the South American context. Following are some of its key features.

a. Option for the Oppressed Majorities

An essential focus of liberation psychology is serving the needs of the oppressed majorities. On its commitment to the poor, liberation psychology remains close to liberation theology. Both makes a preferential option for the poor. According to Duque, the theology of liberation is contextual theology.³ It arises from the common reflections of the poor communities with regard to their faith and experience of God. Theology of liberation stands outside the official theological institutions. Thus for Martín-Baró' liberation psychology also has to take a stance outside the institution of mainstream psychology and opt for the liberation of the poor.

Social liberation should be the focus of psychology because the social structures that keep the poor people oppressed. He reinterpreted some of the traditional theories from the point of view of the poor. For example, Martín-Baró redefined traditional categories of social psychology such as prosocial behavior with a critical and a historical sense, proposing instead typologies more consistent with the daily experience of the poor in El Salvador.⁴ From a socio-historical perspective, he distinguished three kinds of prosocial actions: acts of cooperation, acts of solidarity, and acts of altruism. Acts of solidarity contribute to social unity and give priority to the common rather than individual good. Acts of solidarity contribute to the development of just structures through the support of the weak. Acts of altruism contribute to the sustenance of society by solving difficult problems.

b. Social Orientation

Liberation psychology places an emphasis on social orientation. The major critique of liberation psychology is that the mainstream psychology promotes individualism. It needs to be really social. Psychology, in general, has often put social and economic factors beyond its disciplinary boundary,

preferring instead to look to intrapsychic explanations.⁵ However, human beings develop and become who and what they are through the process of interacting in a socially organized and defined world. Definitely, humans are animals with brains but constantly formed from our interactions with multiple environments.⁶ Therefore, psychology needs to look beyond the individual. Psychologists need to understand how society is structured and how its dynamics influence the human being.

The societal orientation that Martín-Baró' advocates is also historical.⁷ Psychology needs to have a sense of how things got to be the way they are, and how this history is ever present in the subjectivity of the people. Similarly, the recognition of the conflictive nature of society and the omnipresence of power is two fundamental features of this societal orientation of psychology. There is hierarchy and distinct social interests that give rise to conflict. Power is to be understood not just on an interpersonal basis but in terms of its organization in society. Conflict and power have both economic and ideological dimensions, and the latter could be analyzed using psychology. Psychology should aim beyond individual liberation. It should also concern itself with breaking the chains of social oppression.

c. Deideologization

For Martín-Baró yet another objective of liberation psychology is to examine the ideological component of human behavior.⁸ For liberation psychology, individual behavior is not neutral, but originates from an ideological context. Thus, what is required is deideologization--demonstrate how elites enable an oppressive social system, by upholding and promoting beliefs and assumptions that favor status quo.⁹ However, for Martín-

Baró, to be truly emancipatory, psychology must be first liberated from its own ideological chains.¹⁰ This assumes that the mainstream psychology itself is adopted in serving the interests of the ruling power.

Martín-Baró highlighted Freire's concept of the process of conscientization.¹¹ Conscientization leads to transforming the human person through changing his or her understanding of reality. It requires an active process of dialogue that leads to an understanding of the mechanisms of oppression and dehumanization. This opens up new possibilities for action where new knowledge of the surrounding reality leads to new self-understanding about the roots of what people are at present and what they could become. Martín-Baró stressed that ultimately the liberation of the people would imply the liberation of the oppressors too.¹²

d. Methodological Eclecticism

Liberation psychology is open to the use of methods that stem from diverse paradigms.¹³ The pressing social problems require a methodological eclecticism. Traditional techniques (e.g. surveys, use of official statistics, content analyses) are combined with new approaches (e.g. social representations, use of interviews and testimonies, collaborative photography, textual analysis and drama).

There is an emphasis on participatory action research.¹⁴ Relatedly, the method demands the commitment to and engagement with the oppressed, an antidote to academic isolation. Martín-Baró used opinion polls as a tool that could contribute to the formation of a new collective identity for the poor.¹⁵ Thus, research itself became social involvement and a process that identified the knowledge of the poor. This knowledge was not to be used for formulating isolated theories, instead for provoking constructive interventions in the society.¹⁶

Among others, one reason that provoked the army was the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP). The military regime was keen on using the media for winning the hearts and minds of the people through spreading news that they wanted. Those in power constructed the news and other information. When the UCA created the IUDOP, it became a channel for Salvadorans to express what they felt without partisan filters or interference. In this way, the public opinion polls that the government had used to maintain the established order were refashioned into a tool to thwart official discourse, its lies and deceptions. Ignacio Martín-Baró saw the public opinion poll as a powerful tool in the confrontation of ideologies.¹⁷

e. Objection to Value Neutrality

Martín-Baró objected value neutrality.¹⁸ Instead, liberation psychology should be committed to oppressed people. The researcher takes a situated standpoint on the side of the oppressed. Value neutrality serves only the interests of the ruling ideology. Social psychologists must abandon the notion of objectivity, but rather explore the subjective experience of the poor and marginalized. Thus, objectivity is redefined as a matter of ethics, a commitment to the liberation of the poor.

Martín-Baró, however, did not favour an uncritical commitment: There has to be an identification with the oppressed and at the same time necessary distance to examine with critical eyes the proposals emerging from their own praxis. Thus, there has to be a combining of the logic of action with the logic of research. In other words, liberation psychology must recognize the importance of combining both the knowledge of academia and the people in popular praxis and struggles. He did distinguish between political activism and his own commitment to

social reality as an academic. For him, scientist political neutrality was ethically unacceptable. Yet he also warned against political commitment biasing social psychologist's objectivity.¹⁹

2. Relevance of Liberation Psychology

Martín-Baró was committed to his research by situating psychology in his social context. He attempted to understand and develop psychology as a social science committed to the poor. He used empirical tools at his disposal at that moment to unmask the repressive character of the government and to challenge the lies of the State through opinion polling. This was the real reason for his assassination by an elite force of the Salvadoran Army. Martín-Baró challenges us to own up a psychology that is relevant to real social contexts and problems without dictating or homogenizing the ways of doing psychology in different contexts.

Further, I wish to situate Martín-Baró's liberation psychology in the context of the different paradigms in psychology. Here I use Danziger's "Constructing the subject" that traces the history of psychological methods from the nineteenth century to the currently favorite model.²⁰ He begins by tracing three competing models of investigation in psychology: the Leipzig model, the clinical model, and the anthropometric model. Each of these models had its social context, characteristic structuring of the experimental situation, and specific knowledge goals. The Leipzig model from Germany originated in a University context, its experimental situation was characterized by the fluidity of experimenter-subject division, and its knowledge goal was to understand the processes of the human mind. The clinical model from France originated in a medical context, its experimental situation was characterized by doctor-patient interaction, and its knowledge goal was the treatment of the patients. The anthropometric model from England had schools

as its most favourite context, its experimental situation consisted of the test-administrator-subject interactions, and its knowledge goal was the creation of aggregate data to aid administrative practices in various social institutions.

From the “alternative rival conceptions” of psychological investigation, the anthropometric model became predominant in the interwar period. Danziger lists a number of reasons for this narrowing of the investigative practices. Predominant among them is the practical aspirations of psychology that was typified in the way psychology was practiced in U.S. Psychology that increasingly occupied a space in schools, military and industries needed large data in a short time to aid administrative decisions. Therefore, the aggregate of data (modeled after the social survey) was preferred to time-consuming experimental and clinical investigations. Any skepticism of the ‘scientificity’ of the aggregate data was overcome by a number of strategies. The experimentation, modeled after the classroom experiments, provided them with an aura of being scientific. Assigning an individual a space in an aggregate went hand in hand with the propaganda that the measured characteristics (intelligence, personality) were expressions of innate biology. Therefore, studying the laws of behaviour (biological and similar to physical laws) was necessary and sufficient to understand individual behavior. Besides, research reports stripped individuals of all their identities “to create the illusion of empiricism.”²¹

Danziger, unhappy with the narrowing of the investigative practices, concludes with a hope to recover the lost continents of psychological realities for a more liberating praxis of psychology. “The worldly success of modern psychology was built on a narrow social basis.

That entailed a very considerable narrowing of epistemic access to the variety of psychological realities. Critical analysis can give us some insight into the nature of that narrowing. Further insight depends on some knowledge of that which has been excluded – in other words, the knowledge that has emerged in different social contexts. The receptivity of the discipline to such knowledge, however, would seem to be tied to changes in its social and cultural commitments.”²²

Conclusion

Danziger’s critical analysis of the history of psychology shows the narrowing of the investigative practices in the discipline. From alternative and competing models of approaching human reality, psychology came to be relied heavily on positivist research strategies aiming for successful applicability in schools, military, and industry. Instead, Danziger calls for regaining the multiple models for approaching human reality for a more liberating praxis of psychology. Martín-Baró’s proposal for a liberation psychology exemplifies each of Danziger’s analyses. Martín-Baró sees mainstream psychology as a tool of oppression and instead calls for psychology aiding the liberation of the oppressed majorities. He is critical of the overreliance on experimental methods and instead calls for methodological eclecticism. The challenge of liberation psychology for psychology as a discipline is to explore its various possibilities by relocating the subject in social, cultural, and historical context.

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