

Psychology of Liberation

Maritza Montero • Christopher C. Sonn
Editors

Psychology of Liberation

Theory and Applications

 Springer

Editors

Maritza Montero
Universidad Central de Venezuela
Apdo. 80394. Caracas, 1080-A
Venezuela
mmonteroster@gmail.com

Christopher C. Sonn
School of Psychology
Victoria University
Melbourne, VIC 8001
Australia
Christopher.Sonn@vu.edu.au

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*To all those who have fought for liberation,
to all those yet struggling to have it, to all
those who have been partners in the pursuit,
thus helping humanity.*

Series Editor Preface

As series editor, I am delighted to see this fine book added to the Peace Psychology Book Series. The book editors, Maritza Montero and Christopher Sonn, have done a masterful job, making liberation psychology accessible to a wide audience while maintaining a scholarly focus throughout.

It is fitting that liberation psychology is center stage in the Peace Psychology Book Series because peace psychologists recognize that the sustainability of peaceful discourses and actions rests upon the continuous crafting of structures and institutions that are responsive to people's desire for voice and representation in matters that affect their well-being. Hence, the social justice agenda of liberation psychology is at the core of peace psychology.

The pursuit of social justice has not always been central to peace psychology. North American psychologists began to organize and identify themselves as "peace psychologists" in the 1980s during the Cold War. The Cold War featured a global power struggle and nuclear arms race between the United States and Soviet Union. A culture of fear pervaded and the problem of social justice was given short shrift in light of what seemed to be the preeminent concern of peace psychologists, namely, the prevention of nuclear war and the promotion of conflict management.

With the decline of the Cold War and the perceived diminution of the nuclear threat, security concerns were no longer organized around the US–Soviet relationship. Instead, Western peace psychologists turned their attention to ethnopolitical conflicts and, more broadly, the problem of intergroup conflict worldwide. Unlike the Cold War conflict, which invited analyses at the level of elite rhetoric and actions, the complexity of ethnopolitical conflicts required geohistorical considerations that embedded violent episodes in structural and cultural conditions. Clearly, a history of structural violence, marked by oppression and exploitation, was seen as a precondition for violent episodes in many parts of the world.

Besides having a concern about the roots of violent episodes, peace psychologists and liberation psychologists share the view that structural violence in itself is problematic not least because it kills people just as surely as direct episodes of violence. What differs is the means, with structural violence representing a pernicious form of violence that results in slow death through human need deprivation, oppression, and exploitation; a kind of violence that is normalized, impersonal, and built into the structures and institutions of the society.

Between the covers of this book, we are reminded that Latin America has been the engine for liberation movements that seek to redress the problem of structural violence. Rumbings of the movement in psychology can be found in the contributions of Latin American scholars such as Ignacio Martín-Baró, a social psychologist and Jesuit priest from El Salvador, whose ideas were central to the liberation psychology movement that swept across Latin America in the 1980s. These ideas continue to spawn emancipatory agendas all over the world, as illustrated by the chapters in this book, which look at Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, Perú, and Venezuela, and also Australia, England, Malaysia, Philippines, Republic of Ireland, South Africa, and Spain.

In addition to demonstrating the global reach of liberation psychology and its varied manifestations, this book has theoretical and practical implications for the dominant voices in psychology, most of which originate in North America and Western Europe. Not surprisingly, the liberation approach does not always sit comfortably with mainstream psychology because the tenets of liberation psychology challenge the dominant Western psychological perspective, which embraces an individualistic, decontextualized, and objective view of the Other. In contrast, liberation psychology is committed to praxis which frames problems within the context of oppressors and oppressed and pursues theory and practices that benefit the oppressed. From the perspective of liberation psychologists, change happens on the personal and political levels and everyone is affected by the liberation process, even the oppressor who benefits by becoming emancipated from a sense of alienation.

Liberation psychology also challenges theory and practice in peace psychology, much of which is comfortably organized around a corpus of literature on conflict management and resolution, approaches to human relations that can be powerful tools of the status quo, at times reducing tension in conflictual relationships, while conveniently leaving the social order uncontested. Since the Cold War, it has become increasingly apparent in the peace psychology literature that sustainable forms of peace require not only the absence of violence (negative peace) but also the ongoing pursuit of social justice (positive peace) through nonviolent means that transform relationships and structures. Clearly, liberation psychology nudges peace psychology to shift emphasis from tension reduction to tension induction and from a reliance on the power of top-down approaches to bottom-up movements for social change.

Interest in the psychology of peace is often traced back to William James' publication more than 100 years ago on the "moral equivalent of war," a treatise that argued for the importance of providing constructive alternatives to war that would be capable of satisfying the kinds of needs that war fulfills. Montero and Sonn have given us a roadmap for such a "moral equivalent." Scholars and practitioners who adopt this roadmap will find their work advancing toward a major goal linked to the mission of psychology as a profession: the promotion of human well-being for all.

Daniel J. Christie
Marion, OH

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Contributors

Brett Bowman is a senior researcher in the discipline of psychology, School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. His teaching and research interests include violence prevention, genealogies of social issues, the history of the social sciences, community psychology, critical psychology, and the study of racism and public health.

Mark Burton lives and works in Manchester where he manages a large public service for people who are intellectually disabled. His practical and scholarly work has covered organizational, community and social change, the experiences of disabled people and the evaluation of services meant to support them, and alternative perspectives in psychology. This has included making a study of liberation psychology in Latin America, learning Spanish in the process. He is a visiting professor at the Manchester Metropolitan University, an organization with which he collaborates both personally and through the establishment of joint ventures with the health service and local government. Outside paid work he is active in solidarity campaigns with struggles in the majority world.

Rosa Lia Chauca-Sabroso is an educator, specialist in social studies and psychosocial actions in armed conflict situations and natural disasters. She has coordinated the projects: “Process of Elaboration of Historical Memory in Apurímac” (2002–2004); “Process of Psychosocial Accompaniment for Women Victims of Sexual Violence in the Internal Armed Conflict” (2007), and “Psychosocial Accompaniment in Processes of Exhumation in Perú” (2005). She has published two chapters regarding this subject in: Pérez, P. & Navarro, S. (Eds.) *Psychosocial Accompaniment Processes in Latin America*, published in Spain and in *Methodology for the Elaboration of Historical Memory in Rural Communities* (2004). She is a partner at Red Para la Infancia y la Familia – Perú (Network for Childhood and Family-Perú – REDINFA).

Norman Duncan holds a chair in community psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He currently also serves as the head of the School of Human and Community Development at this university. His teaching and research focus on child development, critical psychology, community psychology, and the study of racism. He coordinates the community psychology course in the M.A. in community-based counseling program at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Jorge Mario Flores-Osorio is a psychologist and holds a Ph.D. in science and philosophy. He is a professor and researcher at the Autonomous University of the Morelos State in Mexico. He is also an invited scholar at “Benito Juárez” Autonomous University and Autonomous University of Guerrero State (Mexico) and at the Metropolitan University for Educational Sciences in Chile. He has published several books in Spanish about the concept of work in community psychology, about psychology and genetic epistemologies from a methodological perspective, and about history. He has also published several articles in specialized journals. He has been a member of the International Committee for the Liberation Psychology Conferences.

Sandra Fuentes-Polar is a psychologist and psychotherapist, specialized in applying psychotherapy through art, and the promotion of community mental health and prevention aspects. She has been a coordinator (2005–2006) of the executive team for the project initiated in 2004 “Process of Elaboration of Historical Memory in Apurímac.” Currently, Sandra is a partner at Red Para la Infancia y la Familia – Perú (Network for Childhood and Family-Perú – REDINFA).

Luisa Fernanda Galindo-Villarreal is a psychologist and studies Latin American Studies at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. She participated in the Cultures of Peace Project and is part of the research group “Social Bonds and Cultures of Peace.” She is a teacher at the academic program in Psychosocial Accompaniment for Forcedly Displaced People, and is coordinating a teachers team in charge of the social projects and practices at the Psychology Department in the same university. She has been a consultant for NGOs in issues related to peace and humanitarian assistance.

Manuel Garcia Ramírez is a community psychologist at the Faculty of Psychology, Universidad de Sevilla (Spain). His main research topics are related to developing tools and methodologies in order to empower oppressed diverse group with special focus on women, ethnic minorities, and migrants. As a long-term active member of SCRA and ECPA, he strives to disseminate and incorporate the knowledge of community psychology in the European Migrant Research Agenda, from an international and interdisciplinary perspective. He is an expert partner of European networks on integration and well-being among Muslim immigrants living in oppressive community conditions.

Eneiza Hernández is a Venezuelan psychologist and obtained her degree in psychology from Universidad Central de Venezuela, with a cum laude Master degree in cognitive psychology from “Andrés Bello” Catholic University. From 1987 to 1997 she worked as a lecturer and researcher in community psychology at Social Group CESAP. In that NGO she was also the manager of the Program of Training in Services for the community. She has also worked as therapist in the Centre for Psychological and Educational Care (ODEH in the Spanish acronym), another NGO in Caracas, Venezuela. Since 2002 she has been a consultant in the community psychology field for several public and private institutions, and for international cooperation organisms in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. She has

published several articles in journals (*Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 27, 2004; *Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(3), 1998), chapters in books and in 1996 edited *Participación, ámbitos, retos y perspectivas* [*Participation: Challenges and Perspectives*]. Caracas: CESAP.

Bernardo Jiménez-Domínguez is a psychologist with a Ph.D. in social psychology. He is currently a full-time professor and researcher in the Urban Studies Center of the University of Guadalajara (Mexico). He teaches social psychology and qualitative research in the psychology B.A. and M.A. programs and urban/environmental psychology in the M.A. program in urbanism and development. He has written widely in these fields. His research interests include: critical social psychology, urban culture, identity and appropriation, public space, participation and urban social movements. He has been a member of the International Committee for the Psychology of Liberation Conferences.

Carolyn Kagan is a professor of community social psychology at the Manchester Metropolitan University where she is the director of the Research Institute for Health and Social Change. Her work includes participatory evaluation and action research with those marginalized in different ways by the social system, and she has worked for many years supporting service developments and citizen advocacy projects involving people with learning difficulties. She has a particular interest in the inclusion of disabled people in community life; how people living in poverty can exercise change over their circumstances; and in enhancing university–community engagement. She has worked with colleagues in Latin America and India as well as in Australia and other European countries.

Raylene C. Lewis holds a Master (clinical & health) in psychology and has recently completed her Ph.D. looking at issues of identity construction for South African migrant women living in Australia. She has worked clinically, both in Australia and overseas in East Africa (Tanzania), and has lectured and tutored in the areas of cross-cultural psychology, research methodologies, and critical developmental psychology. Her main research interests are in the areas of race, ethnicity, culture, identity, migration, and critical psychology.

Violeta Luque-Ribelles is a junior researcher in the Department of Social Psychology at the University of Seville (Spain). She received her Master degree with the project entitled “Action Model for the Acquisition of Critical Consciousness by Women in Impoverished Neighborhoods.” Her research activity is focused on developing community-based interventions from a psychology of liberation perspective. Women and migrants living in oppressive conditions are her target groups. In addition, she is working at the labor union UGT (Workers General Union of Andalucía), where she is providing community activist training for workers.

Manuel Llorens is a psychologist, with postgraduate studies in clinical psychology, at the University Hospital, Universidad Central de Venezuela, in Caracas. He teaches personality psychology and coordinates the clinical practice at the postgraduate course in clinical community psychology at Universidad Católica “Andrés

Bello,” also in Caracas. He is a therapist and researcher at that University’s Community Centre, where he works with survivors of family, community, and political violence. He has authored numerous journal articles, and more recently coauthored a compilation of ten years of research with children who have lived on the streets of Caracas.

Geraldine Moane is a senior lecturer in psychology in University College Dublin, and also teaches in Women’s Studies and Equality Studies. She has a longstanding interest in the psychological impact of oppression, and in developing strategies for transformation. She became involved in the women’s movement in 1975 and has been continuously active in a number of areas. Her book *Gender and Colonialism: A Psychological Analysis of Oppression and Liberation* (1999, London: Palgrave) provides a synthesis of key writings in oppression and liberation, and charts the development of liberation psychology.

Maritza Montero is a social psychologist and holds a Ph.D. in sociology. She currently teaches at Universidad Central de Venezuela Doctorate Program and has lectured extensively in the Americas, Europe, and Australia. She is on the editorial boards of several national and international community and social psychology journals, and is an associate senior editor of the *American Journal of Community Psychology*. She has won several national and international scientific awards among which the Interamerican Society of Psychology (1995), and the Venezuelan National Science Award (2000). Maritza has served as the president of the International Society of Political Psychology (2006), and as the vice president for South America of the Interamerican Psychology Society (1997–1999). She has contributed several books and numerous papers and book chapters published in Spanish, English, Portuguese, and French. She has been a member of the International Committee for the Liberation Psychology Conferences and her 2007 production includes books published in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and USA.

Cristina Jayme Montiel has been with the Psychology Department of Ateneo de Manila University for 30 years. Currently, she is a professor and coordinator of the Ph.D. in Social-Organizational Psychology program. During the Marcos dictatorship, she chaired Lingap Bilanggo (Care for Prisoners), a social movement for the general amnesty of all Filipino political prisoners. She has also coordinated nationwide grassroots seminars on structural change, for the PDP-LABAN (President Cory Aquino’s political party). An internationally recognized peace and political psychologist, Montiel serves as editorial board member of the Peace Psychology Book Series by Springer Publications, and was an associate editor of *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*. She has made academic visits in several academic centers in Asia, Australia, and Europe. Christina has received the Outstanding Service Award from the Division of Peace Psychology of the American Psychological Association, the Distinguished Contribution Award from Psychologists for Social Responsibility, and was in the first group of senior research fellows of the Nippon Foundation’s Asian Public Intellectuals program. Recent publications include *Toward a Psychology of Structural Peacebuilding* (2001),

Peace Psychology in Asia (2003), and *Political Psychology of Nonviolent Democratic Transitions in Southeast Asia* (2006).

Noraini M. Noor is a professor of psychology and coordinator of the women for Progress Research Unit at the International Islamic University, Malaysia. Her areas of interest include women's work and family roles in relation to well-being, individual differences, work stress, and issues of race relations. She is the coeditor of *Terrorism, Democracy, the West and the Muslim World* (Singapore: Thomson, with Moten, A.R.) and is currently working on an edited volume: *Women in Post-Independence Malaysia: Changes and Challenges*.

Nelson Portillo obtained his bachelor's degree in psychology at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador, and his Ph.D. in applied social psychology at Loyola University Chicago. He has been a member of the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP) at UCA, in San Salvador; the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) at Loyola, Evanston Northwestern Health Care Research Institute at Northwestern University, and the Center for Capacity Building on Minorities with Disabilities (CCBMDR) at the University of Illinois in Chicago (UIC). He has published studies on street gangs and school violence in El Salvador and investigations related to the history of psychology, and about the life and works of Ignacio Martín-Baró. He coordinated and compiled *Social Psychology in the Postwar: Theory and Applications from El Salvador* (2005, UCA Editores), the first major collection of social psychology writings in El Salvador since the murder of Ignacio Martín-Baró. He is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Health Research and Policy (IHRP) at UIC.

Agustin Martin G. Rodriguez is an associate professor of philosophy at the Ateneo de Manila University. His work on democracy, discourse theory, social justice, poverty, and political reform has been published both in philosophy and social science journals. He has worked with nongovernmental organizations for human rights, rural development, good governance, electoral and political reform, and poverty alleviation. He has done work with progressive and mainstream political parties as well.

Stella Sacipa-Rodríguez is a Colombian, born in Bogotá. She studied psychology at the National University of Colombia, has a Master degree in communication from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, at Bogotá. She is deeply engaged in research and action to relieving the pain caused by political violence displacement in her country. She created and coordinated the Cultures of Peace Project, and has worked with the community of Altos de Cazucá, from 2001 to 2004. She is a researcher in social and political psychology and coordinates the research group "Social Bonds and Cultures of Peace."

Alejandra Sapene-Chapellín is a psychologist with graduate studies in clinical community psychology at "Andrés Bello" Catholic University, Caracas, Venezuela, where she currently is a lecturer in educational psychology and also works at the Psychology Unit of "Social Park Manuel Aguirre, S.J." (a centre for community services sponsored by the above-mentioned university), in clinical community

research and action projects. She has also taught evaluation and intervention in emotional processes of children and adolescents (Institute of Psychopedagogy (2001–2003)). Her current area of research is violence prevention and promotion of coexistence in schools.

Christopher C. Sonn teaches and researches in the areas of critical community psychology and qualitative research methodologies at Victoria University in Australia. He is interested in intergroup relations, specifically individual and community resilient responses to oppression. His research includes examining the settlement needs of refugees, examining ways in which Aboriginal people negotiate dominant group discourses, cultural diversity and economic development, participation and community arts, and the negotiation of “whiteness” in race relations. He has several papers based on this work that have been published in refereed internationally recognized journals including the *American Journal of Community Psychology* and a special issue of the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology (JCASP)* on disrupting the dynamics of oppression in research and practice. He has coedited a book on Sense of Community and he currently is an associate editor of the *JCASP*.

Claudia Tovar-Guerra is a Colombian, born in Bogotá. She is a psychologist specialized in conflict resolution, and studying political studies at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, where she has also been teaching for the last 7 years. She participated in the Cultures of Peace Project and is part of the research group “Social Bonds and Cultures of Peace.” She is also coordinating the academic program of Psychosocial Accompaniment for People Displaced by Force. She has been a consultant to organizations in charge of humanitarian emergency assistance to displaced people in Colombia.

Raul Vidales-Bohórquez is a psychologist, currently studying social policies at the Pontificia Javeriana University. He is a researcher in the social and political psychology’s fields and is a member of the investigation group “Social Ties and Peace Cultures.” He has developed psychosocial and organizational support processes for displaced people. He teaches cinema and psychosocial analysis and cinema and historical memory courses at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá.