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Liberation Psychology: Drawing on history to work toward resistance and collective healing in the United States

Hannah K. Heitz
University of Louisville

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Liberation Psychology: Drawing on history to work toward resistance and collective healing in the United States

Cover Page Footnote

Hannah Heitz <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0402-0717> I have no known conflict of interest to disclose. I would like to thank Dr. Barbara Stetson for her support with conceptualizing the historical framework of this paper. I would also like to thank Theresa Heitz and Dr. Amanda Mitchell for their expertise and assistance throughout the editing process. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hannah Heitz, Department of Counseling and Human Development, 1905 S. 1st Street, Louisville, KY 40208. Email: hannah.heitz@louisville.edu

2020 was rife with *unprecedented* events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, but it was also a year of the United States' history of oppression presenting itself more clearly through every phone, TV, and computer screen. While history books describe periods of violence, social unrest, and oppression, those periods can feel distant. Yet, the United States is experiencing a historical period of individual and structural challenges, which also makes room for the possibility of great change. At this moment, what is the role of psychologists? Is it ethical, or possible, for psychologists to see themselves as separate from the current sociopolitical context? As a field that has historically prided itself on being *ahistorical*, how can psychologists reflect on our history and apply lessons learned to facilitate positive social change and collective healing?

One answer lies in studying the philosophy and actions of psychologists who have facilitated positive social change in the past. One such psychologist is Ignacio Martín-Baró. Martín-Baró, a Spanish-born Jesuit priest, scholar, and social psychologist, was murdered in 1989 in El Salvador by the Salvadoran military for his academic and social justice work (Lykes & Sibley, 2014). His writings were produced more than thirty years ago, yet his foundational contributions to liberation psychology remain relevant today. In this article, I will explicate the history of liberation psychology, identify the tasks Martín-Baró described as necessary for enacting liberation psychology, and describe how current efforts in the field of psychology embody his tasks to work toward collective healing in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and continued effects of systemic racism. As Martín-Baró (1994) pointed out, there is much we can learn from history to work toward progress in the future. Thus, this article aims to draw upon some of Martín-Baró's final words of advice to outline how psychologists, and psychology as a field, can continue to work toward enacting a vision of liberation for the United States during a period in which oppression, violence, and polarization are especially salient.

Early Development of Liberation Psychology

Historically, the field of Western psychology has been centered on the individual and, as a science, is generally focused on the study of individual differences (Benjamin, 2019). Western psychology is described as “the study of the mind and behavior” with an emphasis on using empirical psychological knowledge to understand and treat individual distress or dysfunction or change behavior (American Psychological Association, n.d.). In contrast, liberation psychology, which originated in Latin America and was founded by Martín-Baró, is centered on both structural and individual factors (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020; Moane, 2003). While liberation psychology identifies oppressive sociopolitical systems as the origin of distress (Martín-Baró, 1994), Western psychology conceptualizes distress through the lens of the biopsychosocial model, which posits that the interaction

between biological, psychological, and social factors is what leads to distress or dysfunction within the individual (Engel, 1977). For example, liberation psychology suggests that an individual holding a marginalized identity might experience anxiety in response to their experiences of discrimination and oppression, with an emphasis on the role that larger structures and sociopolitical factors play in perpetuating their experience of oppression at the individual and collective level. Conversely, Western psychology, and the biopsychosocial model specifically, might suggest that their anxiety stems from the interaction between biological factors like their genetic vulnerability to stress, psychological factors such as their emotions or temperament, and social factors like their social support and access to healthcare. According to liberation psychology, marginalized individuals and groups experience prejudice and bias, internalize negative stereotypes, and are pathologized by Western psychology for identifying or responding to oppression—all of which make it difficult to experience psychosocial well-being (Martín-Baró, 1994).

Martín-Baró's understanding of psychology as an "instrument of change" (Portillo, 2012, p.81) was influenced by his education and sociopolitical contexts, such as his doctoral training in social psychology at the University of Chicago, the growth of Liberation Theology in Latin America, Black psychology in the United States, and the civil war and violence in his chosen home of El Salvador (French et al., 2020; Lykes & Moane, 2009; Portillo, 2012). While living in El Salvador, he witnessed social conditions that perpetuated marginalization and suffering of those experiencing deep poverty and he continuously advocated for marginalized groups (Martín-Baró, 1994; Portillo, 2012). Martín-Baró was often a target of violence, including multiple bombings, but despite the risks of staying in El Salvador, Martín-Baró continued to teach, write, and serve his community (Portillo, 2012). Martín-Baró advanced the field of liberation psychology through scholarship and advocacy until the end of his life; in fact, when the Salvadoran military came to execute him in the early hours of the morning, he was editing a manuscript (Portillo, 2012).

Although Martín-Baró received his psychological training in the United States, he had many critiques of the Western approach to psychology; to that end, as an act of rejection of Western psychology, Martín-Baró chose to write almost exclusively in Spanish despite being fluent in English (Portillo, 2012). Many of his essays were posthumously translated into English and published in 1994 in a volume titled *Writings for a liberation psychology* (Martín-Baró, 1994). Far from the typical focus on the individual within Western psychology, Martín-Baró theorized that societal and collective factors influenced psychological problems and, therefore, we must utilize collective solutions to address psychological problems (Lykes & Sibley, 2014). French and colleagues (2020) posit that Black Psychology influenced the development of core ideas of liberation psychology as

well. For example, the foundational article “Toward a Black Psychology” (White, 1970) highlighted how deficit-oriented Western psychology did not align with the experience of Black people and failed to consider the role of identity or oppression on distress long before Martín-Baró’s writings on liberation psychology. Aligned with White’s (1970) critiques of Western psychology, liberation psychology prioritizes the voices of marginalized groups, resists oppression, facilitates awareness of social inequities, highlights strengths, and empowers marginalized populations—its focus includes both the individual and the structural (Lykes & Sibley, 2014).

Critical Ideas in Liberation Psychology

A key component of liberation psychology lies in the development of critical consciousness, a concept developed by Freire and his writings, such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970; French et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). Freire used the term “concientizacao,” translated as critical consciousness, to describe the process of learning and increasing awareness of the sociopolitical context and taking action to challenge oppression (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). Within liberation psychology, critical consciousness is how awareness of oppression facilitates psychological liberation for oppressed people (French et al., 2020).

Martín-Baró (1994) noted three unique aspects of the ongoing process of critical consciousness. First, individual change occurs through active engagement in dialogue. Second, the individual becomes aware of systems of oppression and the possibility of making change. Third, the individual begins to understand their ability to actively shape their identity and their role in the social context; this part of the process includes a historical understanding of the self and community, which is often referred to as recovery of historical memory. Critical consciousness is an active, ongoing process of transforming self and social reality (Martín-Baró, 1994). In the therapeutic context, critical consciousness prioritizes empowerment of an individual’s multiple identities and supports a sense of social connectedness and community (Martín-Baró, 1994).

Aligned with the importance of critical consciousness, Martín-Baró (1994) noted that psychology must consider the individual within the social system. Without considering the sociopolitical and historical context of the individual, oppression and barriers to the development of historical identity are perpetuated (Martín-Baró, 1994). As such, liberation psychology requires critical consciousness, awareness of social inequities, and practices that dismantle the social and psychological factors that uphold oppression—including both institutional and internalized oppression (Martín-Baró, 1994; Moane, 2003). Personal liberation is part of the process of collective liberation. When those who

are oppressed begin the process of liberation, it becomes possible for all to experience emancipation and healing (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020).

Historical Evolution of Liberation Psychology

Liberation Psychology has grown far beyond El Salvador and has become a global movement. Its international history is beyond the scope of this paper, although it is important to understand how liberation psychology has been applied in the United States in order to understand its current and potential future applications. Martín-Baró traveled widely before his death and the United States was among his most frequent destinations (Portillo, 2012). During his travels, he cultivated many friendships with scholars, psychologists, and activists in the United States (Portillo, 2012). M. Brinton Lykes, a psychologist at Boston College, was one noted colleague and friend (Portillo, 2012; Lykes, 2012).

Martín-Baró worked with other psychologists in the United States as part of the Network in Communication and Documentation for Mental Health and Human Rights (i.e., the Network), which aimed to shift the Eurocentric flow of psychological information and knowledge and highlight work being produced in Latin America (Lykes, 2012). Lykes and others engaged with Martín-Baró as part of the Network responded to the death of their colleague by starting the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights in 1990 (Lykes, 2012; Lykes & Sibley, 2014). Unlike traditional charities, this fund strives to support work that aligns with the values of liberation psychology with the goal of not only improving well-being but also addressing and changing underlying social causes of oppression, representing one example of how Martín-Baró's legacy lives on (Lykes, 2012).

Liberation psychology has also influenced theory and practice within the United States beyond the work supported by the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights. Liberation psychology has been identified as a powerful framework to understand oppression and healing for marginalized groups in the United States (Grant et al., 2003). Martín-Baró's writings, as well as critical work produced by Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, and many other scholars, influenced the development of Black Liberation Psychology (BLP; Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2016). Additionally, liberation psychology has been widely incorporated into Black psychology (e.g., Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020; Comas-Díaz, 2021), community psychology (e.g., Prilleltensky, 2003), and counseling psychology (e.g., Singh, 2016; Singh, 2020).

Liberation psychology is a valuable schema for conceptualizing the oppression of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) populations living in the United States. Importantly, liberation psychology goes beyond simply coping with oppression and instead supports empowerment and resistance (Bryant-Davis

& Moore-Lobban, 2020). Liberation psychology provides space to make sense of the impact of racism, intergenerational trauma, and intersectionality (Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020). For example, recovering collective historical memory, addressing individual and structural sources of discrimination, developing critical consciousness, and challenging oppressive narratives have been cited as key elements of BLP (Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2016). Comas-Díaz (2021) described that elements of liberation psychology, such as the focus on decolonization, recovery of historical memory, and respect for indigenous wisdom, are supportive of healing for Afro-Latinx populations.

One of the greatest challenges of liberation psychology is how it can be applied to shift away from traditional research practices towards practices that include the community and promote systemic change. Influenced by Martín-Baró's work, Prilleltensky (2003), a community psychologist, has proposed methods to align research and action in the fight for liberation. Prilleltensky has advocated for infusing principles of liberation psychology within the field of psychology and generated the concept of psychopolitical validity, which is an approach to evaluate how research and interventions engage with and address the role of power, evaluate structural systems, and promote social justice (Prilleltensky, 2003; Speer, 2008).

Prilleltensky (2003) outlined two types of psychopolitical validity: epistemic and transformative. Epistemic psychopolitical validity includes an awareness of power and oppression with consideration of these factors in research and practice (Prilleltensky, 2003). Transformative psychopolitical validity is described as prioritizing liberatory practice in research and action and ensuring that practices such as education, empowerment, and community engagement are included in *all* actions and interventions (Prilleltensky, 2003). These two types of psychopolitical validity are examples of ways in which liberation psychology can be infused into research practices (French et al., 2020).

Social justice is a critical element of counseling psychology (Chavez et al., 2016), yet those inside and outside the field have acknowledged that social justice has not been consistently integrated into research and practice (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003). Counseling psychology has drawn on liberation psychology as a means of addressing this challenge (French et al., 2020; Singh, 2020). For example, elements of liberation psychology have been utilized in the development of interventions for Latinx survivors of domestic violence (Perilla et al., 2012), group interventions for peace and reconciliation work (Norsworthy & Buranajaroekij, 2011), and guidelines for culturally informed counseling practices (Duran et al., 2008). In fact, in 2020 the presidential initiative of the Society for Counseling Psychology was "Building a Counseling Psychology of Liberation," which reflects an intentional shift toward incorporating the tenets of liberation psychology and the work of Martín-Baró into the field of counseling psychology (Singh, 2020).

Guidance From “A Psychologist in El Salvador”

Two years before his death, Martín-Baró was interviewed by Alison Harris for *The Psychologist*. In the article, titled “A Psychologist in El Salvador,” Martín-Baró described the role of psychology amid a country experiencing civil war, state terrorism, and stark social inequity (Harris, 1990). Reflecting on this chilling interview that was published after his death, it is not difficult to draw parallels between the upheaval and oppression he describes (Harris, 1990) and aspects of the current reality in the United States. While the United States is not facing the same conflicts described by Martín-Baró, it is clear that BIPOC groups are disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 cases and deaths, high rates of race-based violence, and discrimination (Garcia, 2022). As outlined by numerous scholars (e.g., Andrasik et al., 2022; Garcia, 2022), the inordinate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on BIPOC populations is one of many consequences of the United States' history of systemic racism, violence, and inequity. Given these similarities, there may be many lessons we can learn from Martín-Baró as well as liberation psychology more broadly to address the ongoing effects of systemic racism in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on one of his last interviews and his writings, Martín-Baró implicitly and explicitly drew attention to five tasks to facilitate liberation based on his experience in El Salvador and his conceptualization of liberation psychology:

Task 1: Recovery of Historical Memory

Historical memory is a key component of working toward liberation (Martín-Baró, 1994; Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020). As Martín-Baró (1994) described,

[recovery of historical memory serves] not only the sense of one's own identity and the pride of belonging to a people but also a reliance on a tradition and a culture, and above all, with rescuing those aspects of identity which served yesterday, and will serve today, for liberation. (p. 30)

According to Martín-Baró (1994), by understanding the past, we gain the ability to create change in the future.

Recovery of historical memory is one mechanism to address internalized oppression; by understanding the history of the individual and community, there is a pathway for understanding the origins of internalized oppression and the opportunity for potential alternatives in the future. For example, following the Guatemalan civil war which lasted from 1960 to 1996 and primarily targeted civilians of Mayan descent, the Catholic Church initiated the Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI; Snyder, 2019). The goal of the project was to allow survivors of political violence in Guatemala to share their experiences and stories to inform a more equitable future and promote justice, forgiveness, and

reconciliation (Mersky, 2000; Snyder, 2019). This project provided space for survivors to describe their experiences of trauma and violence through interviews (or *testimonios*) collected from and by Mayan people and a formal report was generated with recommendations based on the experiences described (e.g., remembrance of victims, punishment for perpetrators, and reparations; Proyecto Interdiocesano Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (Guatemala), 1999). Other notable elements of the project included workshops and small groups focused on the recovery of historical memory and the celebration of collective memory, which created a space to express emotions, celebrate narratives of survival, and deepen support systems (Snyder, 2019). The collection of testimonios and the workshops also generated an avenue through which people could access mental health providers. REHMI incorporated the voices of Mayan people throughout the project; testimonios were collected by Mayans and the victims were honored using rituals significant to Mayan culture (Snyder, 2019). REHMI is one clear example of how historical memory, among other elements of liberation psychology, can be harnessed to address the implications of racially or ethnically driven violence.

Using a liberation psychology analysis within the context of the United States, Adams and colleagues (2006) explored how perceptions of racism influenced the varied understandings of the response to Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, the authors examine the role of historical memory in understanding how racism impacted the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In 1927, wealthy communities in New Orleans chose to intentionally flood poor Black communities rather than experience flooding themselves (Adams et al., 2006). Like what was experienced after Hurricane Katrina, the Black community affected by the flood in 1927 did not receive sufficient aid or support from the Red Cross (Adams et al., 2006). There was skepticism that racism contributed to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in many communities, yet knowledge of historical oppression makes it difficult to cast doubt on the role racism played in the recovery from Katrina (Adams et al., 2006). In fact, research has shown that for White Americans there is a positive relationship between a lack of awareness of historical racism and an underestimation of current racism (Nelson et al., 2010). The example of Hurricane Katrina highlights that historical memory is crucial for accurately assessing and understanding the role of racism, and arguably other forms of oppression, in current times. Building on the outcomes of REHMI and the findings of Adams and colleagues (2006), utilizing recovery of historical memory in the context of the ongoing racial discrimination and violence, it is clear that we must evaluate existing approaches to historical education and prioritize perspectives of oppressed groups to support a future of liberation.

Task 2: De-Ideologize Everyday Experience

Martín-Baró (1994) described de-ideologizing everyday experiences as stepping back from socially constructed stories and what we feel we know about others and stepping into reflection and attempting to objectively observe our social environment. In practice, this means questioning and reflecting on one's own worldview. Without engaging in this reflection and skepticism, it is easy to see one's position and opinion as fact. Historically, this has played out in the way racist and sexist research questions have been asked in the field of psychology and, thus, how the field has perpetuated racism and sexism more broadly (Benjamin, 2019; Cattell, 1903). For example, research questions centered on the superiority of White men (Cattell, 1903) or the superiority of certain races (Garth, 1921) were commonplace. Traditionally, psychology has considered itself to be an "objective" science, both in how questions are generated and what is considered fact (Benjamin, 2019). The idea of de-ideologizing necessitates that we acknowledge psychology's inherent subjectivity and how power and oppression influence the focus of research (Adams et al., 2015).

In a research context, "to de-ideologize means to retrieve the original experience of groups and persons and return it to them as objective data. People can then use the data to formally articulate a consciousness of their reality, and by so doing, verify the validity of acquired knowledge" (p. 31, Martín-Baró, 1994). Through his work at the University Institute of Public Opinion at Central American University, Martín-Baró and his colleagues interviewed and polled the community to understand the lived experience and needs of those in El Salvador. At the time of his murder, he was in the midst of a project to conduct in-depth interviews with over 4,000 people in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica to understand ongoing violence and civil war (Morin, 1989). It is speculated that this polling work, and his willingness to share results that highlighted the people's dislike of the Salvadoran military, led to his being targeted and killed (Morin, 1989). Martín-Baró's utilization of in-depth interviews and polling is one mechanism of de-ideologizing everyday experience.

Martín-Baró's description of de-ideologizing runs counter to the most commonly used research methods, although it is reminiscent of an increasingly common research approach, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR; Muhammad et al., 2015). CBPR is an approach that incorporates participants in the process of research and change (Case et al., 2014). Rather than seeing participants as solely a data source, CBPR invites participants into the research process (Case et al., 2014; Salimi et al., 2012). CBPR brings in community partners as equals and generates opportunities for mutual learning between researchers and the community, which is starkly different from traditional "objective" research methods that aim to increase the distance between researchers and those being

researched (Benjamin, 2019). In addition to CBPR, qualitative research methods are aligned with the values of liberation psychology. As pointed out by Duran and colleagues (2008), quantitative methods are typically narrowly focused and entirely guided by researcher subjectivity, whereas qualitative methods allow the voices of participants to come through more clearly with opportunities for open-ended responses and answers that might go beyond the expectations or hypotheses of the researcher.

While CBPR is growing in use (Case et al., 2014), the incentive structure of the academic system is not set up to support CBPR or qualitative approaches to research. Incorporating participants in the research process and using qualitative methods typically takes longer to accomplish, which, in a “publish or perish environment,” is often infeasible for a faculty member seeking tenure or a graduate student working to finish their dissertation. To move toward the widespread use of liberation psychology-informed research approaches, we must address the historical and systemic barriers to de-ideologizing that are present in the field.

Task 3: Utilize the People’s Virtues

Martín-Baró (1994) proposed that “utilizing the virtues of the people” (p. 31) is a key element of enacting liberation psychology in theory and in practice. Martín-Baró went on to describe his experience of witnessing the virtues of the people:

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)

Specifically, this concept recognizes the inherent virtues of oppressed people and the power they have to improve their lived experiences (Chavez et al., 2016). Oppression contributes to psychological challenges, yet it also fosters individual and community strengths (Moane, 2003). Using a strengths-based approach provides space to focus on what traits or experiences can foster improved outcomes, which parallels Martín-Baró’s emphasis on the “virtues of the people.” Such strengths, or virtues, might include compassion, courage, generosity, or perseverance.

Historically, the field of psychology has operated from a deficit lens, which is centered on highlighting psychopathology (Greven et al., 2018). As a field, psychology incorporates the importance of utilizing a strengths-based approach (Magyar-Moe, 2015), although this approach is not consistently reflected in current research (Xie, 2013). Over the past few decades, there has been an increased focus on evaluating how strengths can promote well-being for those experiencing marginalization (e.g., economic marginalization, systemic racism; Dueweke et al.,

2015; Gallo & Matthews, 2003). However, using a strengths-based approach in a vacuum can ignore systemic oppression and can also lead to the misguided understanding that the development of individual strengths is the solution to systemic problems. Importantly, liberation psychology centers strengths while considering structural oppression and the ways in which particular populations are systematically marginalized.

With the inclusion of virtues at the individual and collective level, liberation psychology acknowledges the value of historical wisdom and existing healing strategies, whereas Western psychology casts doubt on indigenous healing practices (Chavez et al., 2016). There is also an emphasis on evidence-based practice (EBP) within the field of psychology, which means that treatment is guided by research-supported techniques and interventions (Lucero, 2011). EBPs reflect the flow of expertise and knowledge from scientists or practitioners to the community rather than considering the knowledge communities hold about their own experience and healing (Hill et al., 2010). As Lucero (2011) describes when discussing the barriers of EBPs for American Indians and Alaskan Natives, "...it is necessary to adjust the definition of evidence away from the science-based evidence of the dominant paradigm and into the community-based (practice-based) form that is reflective of the true experiences of AI/AN people" (p. 321). The "dominant paradigm" described is rooted in colonization, racism, and White supremacy. It is based on Western knowledge being the objective truth and fails to consider how that "knowledge" has displaced cultural knowledge and traditional healing practices (Lucero, 2011).

Additionally, while there has been some research on the value of traditional healing practices (Hartmann & Gone, 2012; Moodley et al., 2008), it is not always discussed or taught within academic coursework or clinical training (Bojuwoye & Sodi, 2010). As described by Bojuwoye and Sodi (2010), incorporating the value of traditional healing practices into current psychotherapy and counseling is challenging given the paradigmatic differences between Western psychology and liberation psychology's etiological understandings of psychological distress. For example, Western psychology often considers distress a phenomenon occurring within the individual, whereas liberation psychology understands distress through a societal and relational lens (Duran et al., 2008).

While Western psychology has discounted the value of traditional healing practices (Benjamin, 2019), they are an invaluable community strength that should be leveraged in supporting mental well-being. Aligned with Martín-Baró's (1994) focus on virtues, awareness and incorporation of individual and community strengths are critical to the theory and practice of liberation psychology. As Moane (2003) described in the context of Irish women's liberation and community development in Ireland, focusing on strengths can be an important building block toward liberation. While using a strengths-based approach is not a solution to

systemic oppression, it is an important tool that can be used to address the effects of racism and discrimination at both the individual and structural levels within the United States. For example, increasing awareness of strengths and empowering individuals can support assertiveness, joining with others to pursue collective action, and an increased sense of solidarity (Moane, 2003). By utilizing virtues, there is also acknowledgment and respect of the internal strength and knowledge of individuals and communities and space for individuals to experience empowerment.

Task 4: We must work differently

In his 1987 interview, Martín-Baró was asked about how psychologists were working amid conflict and violence in El Salvador. He responded by stating the following, “Psychologists have been forced to look for different approaches. You *cannot* use the normal models, the predominant models because it’s not that they are good or bad, it’s just that they do not work. Period.” (p. 265, Harris, 1990). Working differently included not only practicing psychotherapy differently but also reimagining the traditionally individual bounds of psychology. At a practical level, Martín-Baró cited the necessity of adapting how psychotherapy was provided in El Salvador. For example, meeting individuals where they are, whether that means working with individuals in resettlement camps or working with union groups to facilitate consciousness-raising, rather than seeing clients from traditional offices that might be inaccessible to marginalized groups (Harris, 1990).

In contrast to the individual focus of Western psychology, Martín-Baró wrote widely about the effects of sociopolitical circumstances on well-being and often referred to the psychological consequences of the violence he witnessed in El Salvador. Describing the psychosocial effects of the Salvadoran civil war, Martín-Baró (1989) outlined three central characteristics: 1) violence 2) social polarization with entrenched, divisive ideological beliefs and 3) “the institutional lie” (p. 8), described as how institutions shape the interpretation of reality. The characteristics of the civil war operated at the individual and structural level, and Martín-Baró posited the resultant psychosocial trauma exists at both the individual and structural levels as well. Given this conclusion, Martín-Baró highlighted the necessity of finding tools beyond individual and group psychotherapy and considering interventions that operate at a structural level to “depolarize, demilitarize, and de-ideologize” to produce meaningful, long-term change (Martín-Baró, 1989).

While the United States is not in a civil war, the violence, polarization, and concept of the “institutional lie” described by Martín-Baró reflect the current day-to-day experience in the United States (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). Similar to the forced shift in providing services in El Salvador, the Covid-19 pandemic and the increased awareness of systemic racism in 2020 have pushed psychologists in the

United States, and many other countries, to approach care differently. Many psychologists were left with no choice but to adapt to telehealth because in-person services were not always a feasible option (Pierce et al., 2021). As Torous and Wykes (2020) describe, the increased use of telehealth has come with benefits for many groups and individuals. It is expected that many psychologists will return to in-person services, yet we must ensure that we do not abandon the opportunities associated with the new approaches that we have relied on during the pandemic.

There were also changes to mental health care prompted by the protests and increased attention to the continued racial violence during 2020. One such example is the development of Therapists for Protester Wellness, which was created by Millicent Cahoon (Atkins, 2020; Cahoon et al., 2021). Cahoon noted the unmet mental health needs of those fighting for social justice at protests and was determined to find a way to bring therapists to the protestors. Through this program, free or discounted therapy services were offered to residents and protestors and, importantly, clients could feel confident that their therapist was aligned with their social justice orientation (Atkins, 2020; Cahoon et al., 2021). This program represents a shift towards meeting clients where they are and challenges the traditional system of providing care, which often results in perpetuating oppression.

Task 5: “But if [psychology] contributes to alienation or maintaining control of the people, what is psychology for? People don’t need any such psychology.”
(p. 266, Harris, 1990)

Martín-Baró acknowledged the ways psychologists in El Salvador have either perpetuated oppression or fought against oppression and violence (Harris, 1990). He described those ignoring and perpetuating oppression as the psychologists who “keep on doing their clinical work, and they don’t want to get involved” (p. 265, Harris, 1990). While describing the future of psychology later in the interview, Martín-Baró stated,

So what I am trying to do as a psychologist is to really build up a psychology which can be of help to the needs and wishes and aspirations of the majority of the Salvadoran people. I think that if psychology can help significantly the historical fight of my people, then it will survive and have a future. If not, it’s better that it dies with my country. (p. 266)

Taking Martín-Baró’s statement a step further, by ignoring societal oppression, even if we are clinically addressing the individual consequences of oppression, we are contributing to a form of psychology that minimizes, and even ignores, sociopolitical circumstances.

Liberation psychology calls upon psychologists to recognize how their role is related to a responsibility to take action. Martín-Baró emphasized that maintenance of the status quo and inaction in the face of oppression is harmful.

While this idea is a critical element of certain psychological approaches (e.g., feminist therapy; Brown, 2018), its importance has been furthered by other scholars outside the field of psychology. The current parallels of the dichotomy described by Martín-Baró are clear, particularly for racism in the United States. While systemic racism has existed in the United States since its inception, in recent years there have been innumerable calls for change (e.g., the resurgence of the movement for Black Lives; Diaz et al., 2022) and increased criticism for those who choose to ignore systemic racism and violence (Krieger, 2020). According to Ibram X. Kendi, a historian and antiracist scholar, (2019):

But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle...One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is not in between safe space of 'not racist.' The claim of 'not racist' neutrality is a mask for racism. (p. 10-11)

We must actively engage in dismantling oppressive structures and empower oppressed groups to do the same to promote psychological liberation. Bringing the ideas of Martín-Baró (1994) and Kendi (2019) together, it is clear that if psychologists are not actively fighting against oppression, then the discipline of psychology is not serving the people and it is not supporting healing or liberation.

There are many ways in which psychologists can challenge the status quo and work toward deconstructing oppressive systems. First, psychologists can facilitate structural change within academia. One example is Academics for Black Survival and Wellness (A4BL), an organization created by Della Mosley and Pearis Bellamy at the University of Florida, which aims to foster healing and well-being for Black people and support awareness, accountability, and growth for non-Black people with a specific focus on centering Black liberation in academia (Academics for Black Survival and Wellness, 2021). Second, change can be fostered through initiatives and programs within professional organizations. For example, the 2020 President-Elect of the Society of Counseling Psychology (Division 17 of APA), Amy Reynolds, set forth numerous initiatives to transform training and practice to address and uproot anti-Black racism in the field of counseling psychology (Society of Counseling Psychology, Division 17, n.d.). In 2020, the Kentucky Psychological Association and Kentucky Psychological Foundation developed a mentorship program that matches current graduate students with undergraduate students to increase and diversify the workforce of future psychological practitioners and researchers. Third, psychologists can fight oppression through advocacy individually or as part of larger initiatives. There are many accessible ways to be an advocate for social justice, such as voting, calling local and state representatives, or volunteering time and expertise through larger initiatives organized by the American Psychological Association or state psychological associations.

Conclusions

Historically, there are many ways in which Western psychology has failed us, such as partnering with the field of eugenics and pathologizing diverse sexual identities (Benjamin, 2019). While many may try to distance themselves from the field's dark history, there are numerous examples of inequitable and unethical actions in recent times, such as the American Psychological Association's (APA) collusion with the US Department of Defense to allow psychologists to engage in torture as part of antiterrorism initiatives as outlined in the 2015 Hoffman Report (Gómez et al., 2016). Beyond events that have garnered media attention, there are numerous covert ways in which the field of psychology, as it often operates today, is failing marginalized groups in society. In fact, the APA released the Apology to People of Color for APA's Role in Promoting, Perpetuating, and Failing to Challenge Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Human Hierarchy in the United States (2021) that outlined the innumerable injustices perpetuated by psychology and the necessity to make changes across the field. Some of the actions outlined in the apology include tasks similar to those described previously, such as centering the values of traditional healing practices, acknowledging the limits of Western psychology, and engaging in research and practice with communities of color in equal partnership (APA, 2021). While the actions described in the apology reflect an alignment with liberation psychology, only time will tell if there will be changes in research and practice.

It appears that the field of psychology is shifting in small ways, as evidenced by actions aligned with some of the tasks outlined by Martín-Baró. While we are making incremental progress, we live in a time when more rapid change is necessary as we face the continued salience of systemic racism, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and ongoing mental health crises across the United States (Andrasik et al., 2022). Without considering the tasks outlined by Martín-Baró, it is difficult to imagine how we can move forward as a truly liberatory field. Who is psychology for if we provide services only to those with financial resources? Whom does psychology serve if we only focus on a client's pathology rather than focusing on their strengths as well? Whom are we excluding by ignoring indigenous healing practices? How can our research serve our communities if we do not actively involve them? These questions are present, specific versions of Martín-Baró's question, "But if [psychology] contributes to alienation or maintaining control of the people, what is psychology for?" (p. 266, Harris, 1990). If we answer these questions honestly, it is clear that psychology does not serve all communities.

Psychology, as it exists in the United States today, is not equitably meeting the needs of all individuals and groups. In fact, in some cases, the field continues to perpetuate inequities. While some of these inequities are entrenched beyond the field of psychology, such as the healthcare system in the United States, there are

ways psychologists can advocate for change and it is our responsibility to do so. Liberation psychology provides a framework to understand and make sense of psychology's history, prioritize oppressed voices, facilitate positive change, and work toward collective healing and liberation.

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