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Trauma, Repression, and Resistance: A Critical Psychological Lens on Puerto Rico's Colonial Past

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the psychological effects of U.S. colonial repression in Puerto Rico through a historical trauma lens, framing resistance history as a trauma narrative that shapes identity, collective memory, and mental health. Drawing on decolonial psychology, liberation psychology, and trauma-informed frameworks, the analysis traces how events such as the "Ley de la Mordaza," FBI surveillance ("Las Carpetas"), forced sterilization campaigns, and the persecution of nationalist leaders have contributed to fear-based self-censorship, internalized colonial oppression, and intergenerational psychological distress.

By situating symptoms like anxiety, depression, and identity conflict within the sociopolitical context of colonial domination, the paper critiques the ahistoricism of traditional Eurocentric psychological models and emphasizes the need for culturally relevant interventions. Empirical studies are reviewed that demonstrate how practices like decolonial naming and historical education in therapy can improve outcomes for Puerto Rican clients by reframing pathology as resistance to systemic oppression.

The paper concludes with implications for psychology practitioners, researchers, and policymakers, calling for therapeutic approaches that validate cultural identity, historicize trauma, and promote collective healing. Future research directions include the development of clinical models that incorporate resistance narratives, community healing practices, and culturally grounded understandings of political trauma. By centering the Puerto Rican experience, this paper contributes to broader efforts to decolonize psychology and amplify Indigenous and colonized voices within global mental health discourse.

Keywords
Liberation Psychology, Puerto Rican resistance, colonial trauma, decolonial psychology, historical trauma, political repression

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina los efectos psicológicos del colonialismo estadounidense en Puerto Rico desde una perspectiva del trauma histórico, abordando la historia de la resistencia como una narrativa traumática que impacta en la identidad, la memoria colectiva y la salud mental. Utilizando marcos de la psicología decolonial, la psicología de la liberación y enfoques informados por el trauma, se analiza cómo eventos como la Ley de la Mordaza, la vigilancia del FBI ("Las Carpetas") y la represión de movimientos independentistas han generado censura autoimpuesta, opresión colonial internalizada y malestar intergeneracional.

El estudio critica el ahistoricismo de modelos psicológicos eurocéntricos que individualizan el sufrimiento, y propone comprender síntomas como la ansiedad o el conflicto identitario en contextos de violencia estructural. Se destacan investigaciones que muestran cómo prácticas terapéuticas culturalmente sensibles—como el acto de nombrar de manera decolonial y la integración de la historia política en la terapia—mejoran los resultados clínicos al resignificar el sufrimiento como respuesta a la opresión.

El artículo propone implicaciones para profesionales de la salud mental, investigadores y responsables de políticas públicas, incluyendo la necesidad de enfoques terapéuticos que afirmen la identidad cultural, integren la memoria histórica y fomenten la resiliencia colectiva. Al centrar el caso puertorriqueño, este trabajo contribuye a los esfuerzos globales por descolonizar la psicología y responder éticamente al trauma colonial.

Palabras clave
Psicología de la Liberación, resistencia puertorriqueña, trauma colonial, psicología decolonial, trauma histórico, represión política

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Trauma, represión y resistencia: una mirada psicológica crítica sobre el pasado colonial de Puerto Rico

Introduction

One of the American Psychological Association's (APA) Multicultural Guidelines recommends that psychologists "aspire to recognize and understand historical and contemporary experiences with power, privilege, and oppression (APA, 2017, p. 4)." However, the individualistic perspectives of clinical and counseling psychology training blind psychotherapists to the relevance of the history of oppression in their clients' current presentation at the individual level. To understand Puerto Rican psychological identity development and mental health disparities, this history is essential (Capielo Rosario et al., 2022; Colon, 2023). While Puerto Rico's colonial history is well documented in historical literature, the psychological ramifications of this repression remain understudied in psychological research (Capielo Rosario et al., 2019) due to the field's traditional ahistoricism (Martín-Baró, 1994). Despite extensive sociopolitical research, psychological scholarship has largely ignored the intergenerational trauma of colonial repression in Puerto Rico. This paper uses an integrative, theoretical analysis grounded in decolonial psychology, historical trauma theory, and liberation frameworks. Archival texts, peer-reviewed empirical studies, and historical case examples are used to examine the psychological legacy of political repression in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico's Colonial Status

Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territorial possession or commonwealth of the United States acquired in 1898 following the Spanish–American War. After 400 years of genocide and Spanish colonial rule, Puerto Ricans initially welcomed Americans into Guánica, inspired by the American independence movement's success. However, today Puerto Rico is considered "the oldest colony in the modern world (Trías-Monge, 1999)." In 2016, the United Nations' Special Committee called upon the United States to address urgent economic and social needs, including unemployment, marginalization, insolvency, poverty, and the colonial status of Puerto Rico (Scheper, 2016).

The U.S. has long shaped Puerto Rico's economy through policies that reinforce dependency and limit self-sufficiency. For example, the Jones Act of 1920 significantly increased the cost of imported goods by mandating that all shipments between U.S. ports be carried on U.S.-owned, U.S.-built, and U.S.-crewed vessels. This restriction inflates

consumer prices and limits Puerto Rico's ability to trade freely with other nations, deepening economic hardship (Hillberry & Jiménez, 2023). Martin & Pace (2025) explain how this specific act affected Hurricane Maria victims by causing delays and increased prices for goods, ultimately leading to extended closures of multiple institutions like workplaces, schools, and hospitals. The authors detail how this all contributed to increased acute and chronic physical and mental health issues among Puerto Ricans, contending that this colonialist policy is a social determinant of health.

The island's long history of land dispossession and resource exploitation contributes to economic instability and colonial effects. In the mid-20th century, Operation Bootstrap rapidly transitioned Puerto Rico's economy from agriculture to manufacturing, fostering dependency on U.S. investment rather than sustainable local industry (Dietz, 1986; Pantojas-García, 2014). Puerto Rico's $70+ billion debt crisis has resulted in severe austerity measures, reducing public services, increasing unemployment, and worsening poverty (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019; Mora, 2021). Hedge funds, known as "vulture funds," have taken advantage of the crisis, purchasing Puerto Rico's debt at discounted rates and pressuring the government into extreme austerity policies that have deepened financial instability (Robles & Ferré-Sadurní, 2016; Rosario-Ramos & Burgos-Muñoz, 2022). This pattern persists because Puerto Rico's territorial status precludes voting representation in the U.S. federal government. Instead of representation in the Senate or the House, Puerto Rico has one non-voting Resident Commissioner in the House of Representatives (Trias-Monge, 1999). This lack of representation may contribute to the poverty rate on the island being 41.7% compared to the U.S. national average of 11.5%, as well as incomes in Puerto Rico being roughly one-third those of the United States (Norton, 2023).

Puerto Rico's failure to achieve independence has not been due to passivity, but rather the attempts have been erased from American history or viewed solely as acts of terrorism due to their failure to achieve sovereignty (Torres, 1998; Ayala & Bernabe, 2007). There was not a lack of resistance, but rather Puerto Ricans could not respond to the overwhelming military, political, and economic control exercised by the United States. The criminalization of independence movements, along with state repression and counterinsurgency tactics, has systematically suppressed efforts toward sovereignty (González, 2011; Dávila, 2017). While there was violent resistance used by nationalists, the violence was significantly surpassed by their suppressors.

Despite extensive historical accounts of colonial repression in Puerto Rico, the psychological implications—particularly the intergenerational effects of political trauma—remain largely unexamined in psychology (Capielo Rosario et al., 2019; Sotero, 2006). This paper extends existing scholarly work by highlighting Puerto Rico as a critical case study in understanding the intersection of political repression, historical silencing, and psychological oppression. This work also contributes to the literature by emphasizing how historical and contemporary resistance movements may serve as psychological liberation efforts, fostering identity reclamation and collective healing beyond the traditional therapy office. Ultimately, this paper addresses this gap by applying decolonial and liberation psychology frameworks to Puerto Rico's resistance history, treating it as a trauma narrative that offers insights into culturally specific mental health interventions.

This paper addresses a significant gap in psychological literature by applying trauma-informed, decolonial, and liberatory psychological frameworks to the case of Puerto Rico. It extends existing research on historical trauma by highlighting how political repression and resistance function as core components of psychological identity formation, distress, and resilience.

Historical Trauma: The Suppression of the Resistance

The Torture of "El Maestro"

One of Puerto Rico's main historical leaders was Pedro Albizu Campos. He was an Afro-Latino Harvard graduate and leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party (PNPR) from 1930 to 1965, despite being incarcerated for much of this period (Denis, 2015; Ayala & Bernabe, 2007). During his time in Boston, he was exposed to anti-colonial movements from India, Ireland, and Africa. Albizu Campos volunteered and served in the U.S. Army, where he also witnessed discrimination against Puerto Rican and Black soldiers. His experiences reinforced his opposition to U.S. policies, particularly how U.S. corporations exploited Puerto Rican workers (Denis, 2015). By 1930, after joining and assuming leadership of the Nationalist Party, he shifted from advocating political negotiation to endorsing active resistance against U.S. colonial domination, viewing sovereignty as unattainable through electoral or reformist means alone (Ayala & Bernabe, 2007; Franqui, 2019).

Albizu Campos became aware of Dr. Cornelius Rhoads' unethical medical experiments in Puerto Rico in the early 1930s when Rhoads was conducting research for

the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research (Denis, 2015). The scandal erupted when a private letter written by Rhoads was discovered, in which he referred to Puerto Ricans as a "degenerate" race and admitted that he had done his "best to further the process of extermination by killing off eight and transplanting cancer into several more." A Puerto Rican lab assistant leaked the letter to nationalist leaders, including Albizu Campos, who publicly denounced Rhoads and accused the U.S. government of using Puerto Rico as a testing ground for unethical medical experiments in the Puerto Rican press. Albizu publicly denounced this as evidence of colonial abuse (Denis, 2015; Ayala & Bernabe, 2007). However, the U.S.-appointed Governor James Beverley dismissed the letter as a "joke" and cleared Rhoads of wrongdoing. Decades later, researchers confirmed that Puerto Rico had been used as a testing site for medical experiments, including forced sterilization programs and unethical drug trials. Albizu Campos continued to argue that such abuses were inherent to U.S. colonial rule, further fueling the Puerto Rican independence movement (Denis, 2015).

Albizu Campos known as "*El Maestro,"* was fluent in six languages, a revered orator with a strong following whose advocacy for armed resistance posed a direct challenge to U.S. control (Denis, 2015). While imprisoned, Albizu Campos endured severe mistreatment, including alleged radiation exposure, solitary confinement, and medical neglect. Doctors later confirmed symptoms consistent with radiation poisoning. He passed away in 1965, and many of his supporters believe he was systematically assassinated through prolonged, calculated torture in a manner reminiscent of Rhoads' experiments (Denis, 2015). However, in an interview, then-Governor Luis Muñoz Marín suggested that Albizu Campos had a troubling mental state, as Pedro believed that he was being exposed to radiation (Pearson, 1954). The extreme political persecution of Albizu Campos reflects a larger pattern of state-sanctioned trauma. Albizu Campos' suffering is considered one of the most extreme cases of political persecution in Puerto Rican history (Denis, 2015).

Armed Resistance: The Nationalist Struggle

The Puerto Rican independence movement experienced its most intense period of armed resistance from the 1930s to the 1950s. Nationalists organized labor strikes and demonstrations against U.S. economic control, particularly targeting the exploitation of Puerto Rican workers by American sugar corporations. The U.S.-backed Insular Police responded with increasing authoritarianism, culminating in the Río Piedras Massacre in

1935. This was followed by the extrajudicial executions of Hiram Rosado and Elías Beauchamp in 1936, which resulted from their assassination of Police Chief Francis Riggs in retaliation for the Río Piedras massacre. This repression escalated further with the Ponce Massacre in 1937, when police opened fire on peaceful marchers, killing 19 people, including a child, and wounding over 200 others. These events deepened nationalist resolve but also "justified" greater U.S. surveillance and suppression based on how it was spun in the U.S. (Denis, 2015).

In 1948, the *Ley de la Mordaza* (Gag Law) criminalized pro-independence speech and nationalist symbols, including the use of the Puerto Rican flag. The law not only violated fundamental civil liberties but also contributed to an authoritarian climate of fear that discouraged political participation and free expression. Despite its profound historical significance, the psychological impact of this period—marked by state surveillance, imprisonment, and suppression of cultural identity—has been largely overlooked in mainstream psychological research. The legacy of cultural repression continues to shape contemporary Puerto Rican identity, reflected even in modern artistic expressions. Bad Bunny, a globally influential Puerto Rican artist, recently referred to this Gag Law period in one song, stating, "*Aquí mataron gente por sacar la bandera. Por eso yo la llevo donde quiera* (they killed people for taking out their flag. That's why I take it wherever I go)."

Despite this federally-sanctioned silencing, the Nationalists continued organizing, culminating in the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party Revolts of 1950**.** Nationalists launched uprisings in Jayuya and Utuado briefly declaring Puerto Rico a free republic. The U.S. government responded with overwhelming military force, including aerial bombings—marking the only instance of the U.S. bombing its own citizens. These revolts led to mass arrests, with over 1,000 nationalists imprisoned**,** many without trial (Denis, 2015). The psychological impact of such widespread censorship contributed to long-term fear-based self-regulation, mistrust, and intergenerational silence; these elements are consistent with trauma-related avoidance behavior and learned helplessness. In his book on racial trauma, Hardy (2023) explains how continued oppression can lead to traumatic responses, including internalized devaluation, an assaulted sense of self, internalized voicelessness, and rage.

In the immediate response to this repression and bombings in Puerto Rico, Griselio Torresola and Oscar Collazo went on a suicide mission to assassinate President Harry S. Truman in 1950 to draw international attention to Puerto Rico's plight. While

the attack failed, and they both died, it underscored the desperation and rage of the independence movement under U.S. rule. Four years later, Lolita Lebrón, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irvin Flores Rodríguez, and Andrés Figueroa Cordero attacked the U.S. Capitol in 1954**,** wounding five congressmen (Fernández, 1994; Haslip-Viera, 2006). This act further intensified U.S. efforts to criminalize and dismantle nationalist movements, leading to the long-term imprisonment of their leaders (Lopez Rivera, 2013).

By the 1960s and 1970s, armed resistance declined as different independence movements like the Young Lords emphasized community activism and civil rights on the mainland. This group focused on the Puerto Rican diaspora, mainly in Chicago and New York. In 1977, Young Lords and members of the Puerto Rican Independence movement conducted a peaceful 8-hour protest at the Statue of Liberty by displaying the Puerto Rican flag from the crown of the Statue of Liberty (Enck-Wanzer, D., 2010; Gonzalez, 2011). However, state repression continued on the island, culminating in events such as the *Cerro Maravilla* Incident in 1978 where two young pro-independence activists were ambushed and executed by police. Initially portrayed as a shootout with terrorists, investigations later revealed that the activists had been ambushed and executed after surrendering. The incident led to significant political controversy and the conviction of several police officers and high-ranking political figures **(**Ayala & Bernabe, 2007; Franqui, 2019). A year later, in 1979, Ángel Rodríguez Cristóbal, a Puerto Rican socialist activist who was arrested for his involvement in protests against the U.S. Navy's occupation of Vieques was found dead in his prison cell at the Tallahassee Federal Correctional Institution in Florida under suspicious circumstances (Molina, 1979).

FBI Surveillance and Harassment

Five decades of the above-mentioned suppression was accompanied by FBI surveillance and harassment of many Puerto Rican people. Known as *las carpetas* (the files) this systematic surveillance targeted pro-independence activists, political dissidents, and anyone suspected of opposing U.S. colonial rule, approximately 100,000 people (Denis, 2015). This surveillance program relied on Puerto Ricans spying on each other for the cops, essentially betraying family members and friends. If a file was opened on a person, that person could be discredited, fired, imprisoned, or kicked out of school (Kaike, 2021). While well-known by those who were personally harassed, the practice was officially exposed in the late 1980s, leading to public outcry and the eventual declassification of thousands of files in the 1990s. The release of *las carpetas* has unveiled

extensive evidence of political repression in Puerto Rico. This intrusive monitoring and persecution aimed to suppress pro-independence movements by fostering a climate of fear and suspicion, leading to widespread self-censorship and societal division. The collaboration between the Puerto Rican police and the FBI in creating and maintaining these files highlights a systematic effort to undermine political dissent and civil liberties on the island. There was even a *carpeta* on the governor, Luis Muñoz Marín (Denis, 2015).

On the mainland, FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program targeted the Young Lords, along with other groups, with the goal of "disrupting, misdirecting, or otherwise neutralizing" them (Gonzalez, 2011). Decades later, Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, a former member of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and leader of the *Macheteros*, and a key figure in the island's radical independence movement (Fernández, 1993) was shot by FBI agents and left to bleed to death for hours without medical assistance in 2005. His death sparked protests and renewed discussions about the FBI and the colonial status of Puerto Rico (Comisión de Derechos Civiles de Puerto Rico, 2011; Rosado Marzán, 2007).

Internalized Oppression and Colonial Mentality

Living in a colonial society is inherently a recurring reminder of the "superiority" of the colonial society over that of the indigenous culture (Hartmann et al., 2019). The violent suppression of Puerto Rican nationalists exemplifies the extreme measures taken by the U.S. to maintain colonial control. Psychological trauma from this repression, including surveillance under *las carpetas***,** mass incarcerations, and the criminalization of pro-independence sentiment, continues to shape Puerto Rican identity and political engagement today. In educational institutions, curricula tend to emphasize Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States in terms of economic development rather than colonial subjugation and exploitation (González, 2018). The stigmatization of current pro-independence movements as radical or terroristic further reinforces self-censorship, as individuals fear professional and social repercussions for expressing dissenting views (Blanco-Rivera, 2005).

One of the most enduring consequences of colonial repression in Puerto Rico is the internalization of fear-based self-censorship**.** The suppression of political expression during the enforcement of the *Ley de la Mordaza* became a learned behavior, as those who opposed U.S. colonial rule faced imprisonment, forced exile, and violence (Ayala &

Bernabe, 2007). The historical legacy of colonialism in Puerto Rico extends beyond political and economic subjugation; it also manifests in deep-seated psychological internalized oppression and learned helplessness**.** Scholars have examined the concept of colonial mentality**,** a form of internalized oppression in which colonized individuals adopt negative perceptions of their own culture while idealizing that of the colonizer (David & Okazaki, 2006). While initially studied among Filipinos, this phenomenon is particularly relevant in Puerto Rico, where more than a century of U.S. colonial rule has shaped cultural identity, self-perception, and mental health outcomes**.** The suppression of nationalist movements—exemplified by the Ley de la Mordaza—not only stifled political expression but also contributed to a collective sense of powerlessness and cultural alienation.

Mullany et al. (2022) studied internalized oppression in Puerto Ricans in the diaspora noting a duality of acceptance and propagation of negative stereotypes alongside expressions of community pride and desire for unity. Capielo Rosario et al. (2022) examined how colonial mentality influences psychological distress**,** demonstrating that Puerto Ricans who reject their cultural identity in favor of U.S. assimilation report higher levels of depressive symptoms**.** It was difficult to find published empirical studies of colonial mentality on the island. This is important to note as island Puerto Ricans' experiences of colonialism are direct and persistent, whereas, for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, colonialism may be experienced indirectly and irregularly. However, a recent Albizu University dissertation conducted on the island found that in a sample of 300+ Puerto Rican adults, colonial mentality was significantly correlated with depression (Vasquez Gonzalez, 2023).

Capielo Rosario et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study of Puerto Ricans living in Central Florida, wherein many participants agreed with a statement suggesting that Puerto Ricans were inferior. Additionally, a lower desire to interact or connect with recently relocated Puerto Ricans was linked to colonial mentality ideas of U.S. superiority (e.g., White American culture is more admirable than Puerto Rican culture) and colonial debt (e.g., Puerto Ricans in the United States should be thankful for being in the United States). These viewpoints might also play a part in making the postmigration environment unfriendly for Puerto Ricans from the island who move to the U.S. mainland. Given the current political climate in the United States, which may have been amplified in Florida since the 2017 election, it is unclear how much the U.S. political climate adds to the colonial mentality of these residents.

Puerto Rican Syndrome

The psychological impact of colonialism has also been thought to have manifested in culturally specific syndromes such as *Puerto Rican Syndrome*. This condition has been associated with the embodied stress responses to colonial oppression, systemic marginalization, and intergenerational trauma. *Puerto Rican Syndrome* was historically labeled by U.S. military psychiatrists during the mid-20th century as a form of extreme stress response observed in Puerto Rican soldiers (Mehlman, 1961). This time frame coincided with the years of the Gag Laws. It was often described as an acute dissociative or hysterical reaction triggered by perceived oppression, frustration, or racial discrimination. Rather than being understood within the framework of colonial trauma, early psychiatric literature often pathologized Puerto Ricans and their parenting, failing to contextualize these distress responses within systemic and historical oppression. This pattern of medicalizing colonial trauma rather than acknowledging its roots persists in mainstream psychological frameworks (Gherovici, 2003).

More recently, Puerto Rican veterans continue to report a higher probability of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and more severe symptoms than the other Latine groups in the U.S. military (Escobar et al., 2000). Data from the National Health Interview Survey compared different civilian Latine immigrant groups. Puerto Ricans had higher predicted probabilities of experiencing frequent anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as severe psychological distress. This study suggested that exposure to the psychosocial effects of US colonialism may account for some of these differences (Colón, 2023). Depression rates in Puerto Rico are found that 9.7% of Puerto Ricans living on the island experienced depression, compared to 7.6% of the US population (Canino et al. 2019). Puerto Ricans continue to report the highest frequency of the cultural idiom of distress, *ataque de nervios*, even when compared to other Latine groups. Of note, reports of *ataque de nervios* were associated with greater assimilation to U.S. society (Guarnaccia et al. 2010).

Theoretical Frameworks: Decolonial, Liberation and Trauma-Informed Approaches

To understand the psychological consequences of colonialism in Puerto Rico, this paper draws from decolonial psychology, liberation psychology, and trauma-informed care. Together, these frameworks provide a critical foundation for examining how political repression, cultural erasure, and historical silencing shape both individual and

collective mental health outcomes. Rather than pathologizing Puerto Rican experiences through Eurocentric clinical models, these approaches contextualize psychological distress within systems of domination and historical trauma.

Decolonial psychology emphasizes the importance of reclaiming identity and confronting the epistemic violence of colonial rule (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Cruz & Sonn, 2010). In Puerto Rico, this means acknowledging that symptoms such as anxiety, depression, or self-doubt may stem not from internal dysfunction but from the internalization of colonial ideologies. Capielo Rosario et al. (2022) demonstrated that when Puerto Rican clients were able to name the impact of colonialism in therapy—what they call 'decolonial naming'—they were better able to externalize shame and reframe their distress as a response to systemic injustice, not personal inadequacy.

Liberation psychology complements this by situating healing within collective consciousness and sociopolitical awareness. Martín-Baró (1994) argued that psychology must serve the oppressed by uncovering the ideologies that normalize their suffering. In the Puerto Rican context, this involves not only clinical recognition of historical trauma but also therapeutic engagement with cultural resistance and historical memory. Programs that encourage clients to explore their family's experience with surveillance, forced sterilization, or political silencing offer a form of psychological resistance. These interventions shift therapy from a private exercise in coping to a communal practice of empowerment and meaning-making (Torres Rivera & Torres Fernández, 2023).

A trauma-informed perspective further reinforces these approaches by accounting for the intergenerational transmission of distress. Puerto Ricans impacted by political repression—such as those targeted under "Las Carpetas"—often experience hypervigilance, mistrust, or self-censorship, which may be misdiagnosed in clinical settings when divorced from their historical context. Trauma-informed frameworks advocate for culturally anchored care that sees avoidance and silence not as fatalistic dysfunctions, but as adaptive responses to chronic systemic threat (Gone, 2013; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). In Puerto Rico, such approaches have taken the form of community healing circles, artistic resistance, and the revival of Afro-Caribbean traditions like Bomba and Plena as expressions of resilience and identity reclamation (Mattei & Rodríguez-Madera, 2021).

Together, these three frameworks challenge dominant psychological paradigms by historicizing distress, politicizing healing, and affirming the cultural strengths of

colonized communities. For Puerto Rico, they offer a path not only toward psychological recovery but toward liberation.

Cultural Resilience Building: Decolonized and Liberatory Interventions

To effectively address colonial trauma in Puerto Rico, mental health interventions must incorporate decolonial psychology and culturally adapted liberatory therapeutic approaches (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017). Therapists treating Puerto Ricans need to allow for a discussion of Puerto Rico and its colonial relationship to the United States, particularly if clients are struggling with ideas of inferiority. Gaztambide (2019) illustrates how this can be relevant for a specific case. Identity development and colonial mentality need to be considered in the client's presentation. Capielo-Rosario et al. (2024) provide two practice examples of postcolonial and decolonial psychology with Puerto Rican communities in the United States and Puerto Rico, wherein there is the actual naming and unlearning of coloniality.

Comas-Diaz & Jacobson (2024) emphasized that decolonial therapists integrate Indigenous and Global South healing practices into mainstream psychotherapy. By centering non-colonial structures, decolonial therapists may guide clients in composing their testimonials, engaging in spiritual activism and/or engaging in social justice action. By shifting toward collective healing**,** mental health care can become a site of resistance and empowerment**.** Historically oppressed groups need to be empowered by increasing their "personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (Gutierrez, 1995, p. 229).

From Repression to Resistance and Resilience

Despite the historical colonial challenges, Puerto Ricans have increasingly engaged in collective resistance and psychological liberation**,** reclaiming their identity and history through activism, education, and cultural expression**.** Community-based interventions, the growing decolonization and liberatory movements, as well as grassroots activism have played a vital role in challenging colonial oppression**.** One of the most significant recent examples of mass mobilization was the 2019 resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló**.** Widespread protests, led by prominent Puerto Rican figures like Ricky Martin**,** were fueled by leaked chat messages revealing political corruption, misogyny, homophobia, and disdain for victims of Hurricane Maria. These protests, drawing hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans**,** were more than just a response to Rosselló's

misconduct; they represented a broader rejection of colonial governance and economic mismanagement. This movement demonstrated a shift in Puerto Rican political consciousness, where fear of government retaliation was overcome by collective solidarity and public pressure (Lloréns & Stanchich, 2019). Similarly, the great pride created by the *Puerto Rico se Levanta* (Valle, 2018) movement showcased Puerto Rican resilience after Hurricane Maria. Bad Bunny has also become a symbol of cultural pride and decolonial resistance by focusing his new album on the history of Puerto Rico and highlighting how the exploitation of the island's resources has contributed to mass exodus from the island. By conducting his residency on the island and removing the United States mainland from his world tour, he has brought global attention to the island.

This growing political awareness has extended to electoral politics. In the 2024 elections, Puerto Rico saw a dramatic surge in support for the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), reflecting an increased interest in sovereignty as a viable political alternative. This shift, fueled by frustration with corruption in pro-statehood and pro-commonwealth parties, has revitalized energy in the independence movement. Traditionally marginalized by the dominance of U.S.-aligned political parties, PIP's rising popularity suggests that younger generations are questioning the colonial status quo and seeking greater autonomy and agency. This signals a potential transformation in Puerto Rican identity and political engagement, challenging the long-standing notion that colonial rule as it is today is an inevitable or beneficial arrangement (García, 2024).

Grassroots organizations, environmental activists, and independent scholars have also worked to educate Puerto Ricans about their history beyond state-sanctioned narratives. In recent years, Puerto Rico has also witnessed a series of environmental resistance movements against American developers engaging in land dispossession, particularly focusing on the preservation of public beaches and coastal areas, despite heavy court fines (Monsalve, 2024). All these forms of resistance help to restore pride in Puerto Rican heritage and foster the critical consciousness needed for psychological liberation.

Implications for Psychology Practitioners, Policymakers, and Researchers

For psychologists and mental health practitioners, therapy models should integrate culturally adapted interventions, such as historical trauma-informed therapy, narrative therapy, and community-based healing approaches. Decolonial and liberation theories are essential in diversity training. Incorporating Puerto Rican history, cultural identity, and

collective healing practices into mental health treatment can validate experiences of colonial trauma and empower individuals. Building upon Puerto Rican protective factors can help mitigate the effects of this colonial adversity (Lopez & Estrada, 2022).

For policymakers**,** mental health policy in Puerto Rico must recognize the systemic roots of psychological distress**.** This includes increasing access to quality mental health care**,** funding community-led interventions**,** promoting Puerto Rican mental health research and decriminalizing expressions of Puerto Rican nationalism or Puerto Rican environmental resistance to reduce fear-based self-censorship (Rosado Marzán, 2007). Additionally, polices that ensure proper education of the historical experiences of all citizens are vital.

For researchers**,** there is a need for expanded empirical studies on how long-term colonial oppression affects Puerto Rican mental health, particularly in terms of political repression, and identity conflict**.** Further research should explore how resistance movements and cultural resilience contribute to psychological well-being. The field would benefit from longitudinal studies on the effects of *las carpetas* surveillance on intergenerational political engagement. Research on how cultural pride campaigns (e.g., Bad Bunny, diaspora activism) influence psychological well-being can inform potential treatment recommendations. Additionally, research on the assessment of decolonial psychology training curricula for clinicians working with Puerto Rican populations would provide evidence for such approaches.

Conclusion

The future of Puerto Rico depends not only on political change but on the psychological decolonization of its people. To achieve this, the field of psychology must first decolonize itself. This requires a fundamental shift away from Eurocentric models that pathologize individual distress while ignoring structural violence. Instead, psychological research and practice must be rooted in the historical, political, and cultural realities of colonized communities**.**

Puerto Rico's case demonstrates the urgent need for a psychology that is contextualized, liberatory, and collective—one that honors ancestral memory, recognizes political repression as trauma, and affirms cultural identity as a form of resistance. Liberation psychology, decolonial theory, and trauma-informed care offer tools for this transformation, but they must be applied through a culturally grounded, community-driven praxis.

In doing so, psychologists and researchers not only address colonial trauma more effectively but also participate in the broader project of epistemic justice: reclaiming whose knowledge counts, whose suffering matters, and what healing truly looks like in a postcolonial world. Puerto Rico is not only a site of suffering but also a site of psychological resistance—and its people's resilience demands that the field evolve with them.

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