

## ***Foundations for Liberation: Social Justice, Liberation Psychology, and Counseling***

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### **Abstract**

This article will describe Liberation Psychology's impact on the professional counseling field's focus on social justice. The authors will describe Liberation Psychology's roots in theology, the foundational principles of this theory, and specific examples of where Liberation Psychology has made an impact on the field of counseling. Finally, the authors will provide an illustration of this theory in practice, and discuss several key implications for Liberation Psychology's implementation as a foundation for counseling for social justice.

*Keywords:* social justice, theology, Liberation Psychology

### **Fundamentos de liberación: Justicia social, psicología de la liberación y consejería**

#### **Resume**

En este artículo se describe el impacto de la psicología de la liberación en la consejería profesional en su enfoque en la justicia social. Los autores describen las raíces de psicología de la liberación en la teología, los principios fundamentales de esta teoría y ejemplos concretos de dónde psicología de la liberación ha hecho un impacto en el campo de la consejería profesional. Finalmente, los autores discuten varias implicaciones importantes para la implementación de la psicología de la liberación como base para el asesoramiento de dar terapia con bases en la justicia social.

*Palabras clave:* justicia social, la teología, psicología de la liberación

Social justice has become an increasingly popular and pervasive focus in the realm of professional counseling. There are social justice related counseling books (e.g., Ellis & Carlson, 2009; Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar & Israel 2006), professional organizations (e.g., Counselors for Social Justice), and academic journals (e.g., Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology) that are wholly dedicated to this end. There are several philosophical, professional, and spiritual traditions that have influenced this contemporary movement toward counseling for social justice. This article will describe one theory in particular that has significantly impacted the professional counseling field – Liberation Psychology. The authors will describe Lib-

eration Psychology's roots in theology, the foundational principles of this theory, specific examples of where Liberation Psychology has made an impact on the field of counseling, and an illustration of using this theory in counseling. Finally, the authors will discuss several key implications in regard to using Liberation Psychology as a foundation for counseling for social justice.

### **Liberation Psychology**

The roots of Liberation Psychology are most often traced back to the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró (1991; 1994). Ignacio Martín-Baró was a Jesuit priest that was murdered in 1989 by the Salvadoran Army at the University of Central America in San Salvador. He is credited with developing the Liberation Psychology movement during the ten years preceding his death (Montero & Sonn, 2009). He posited several foundational components of this new psychology, which was

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intended to be of, and for, the oppressed. Martín-Baró's work and contributions to the social justice movement in counseling and psychology are rooted in the broader movements of social action within the global Christian Church, and more specifically within the South American Catholic Christian tradition of Liberation Theology (Ferm, 1986; Gutiérrez, 1988).

### Theological Roots of Liberation Psychology

The term Liberation Theology has taken on many meanings globally. In terms of understanding how this theological movement influenced the work of Martín-Baró, there are two broad themes that informed his work - the broader movements of social action within the global Christian Church (Metaxas, 2011), and the South American Christian tradition of Liberation Theology (Ferm, 1986; Gutiérrez, 1988). Each of these will be briefly highlighted in order to better understand the values and philosophical principles on which Liberation Psychology was constructed.

**Social Action and the Christian Church.** In order to understand Martín-Baró's initial construction of Liberation Psychology, it is helpful to understand his theological roots in the broader framework of social action within the Christian Church as it was manifested globally. Many theologians in the 20th century rediscovered the liberatory themes of the Bible and its focus on the poor and oppressed. For example, the following Biblical passages include notions of liberation for the poor and oppressed.

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” (Isaiah 58:6-7, New International Version).

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

During this time, there was a growing sense that theologians should not just be academics serving the institutional church, but also agents of theological reflection and action in service of the oppressed (Metaxas, 2011). Dietrich Bonhoeffer exemplified this movement toward social action. A German theologian during the time of the Third Reich, and considered by many to be one of the most respected theologian of the 20th century, Bonhoeffer represents one example of a

focus on liberating those who have been oppressed, as well as a shift in how theologians viewed their identity. Bonhoeffer came of age during Hitler's rise and, although he was considered a promising academic theologian upon completing his graduate work, he felt “called” to focus his life's work on being a part of the resistance movement to bring down the oppressive Third Reich. At one point Bonhoeffer was advised to leave Germany in order to save his life, and he spent a year in New York City as a way to avoid this imminent danger (Metaxas, 2011). While there, he encountered the Black Church tradition through Abyssinian church in Harlem, which was pastored by Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. It was in Harlem in the mid 1930's, as a member of this African-American church that boasted of fourteen-thousand members, that Bonhoeffer was introduced to a theological framework that articulated God as defining himself primarily as the God of the Exodus, the God who freed the Hebrew slaves (Metaxas, 2011; Cone, 2008). In this tradition, Moses would have been considered a theologian of liberation with his words to Pharaoh such as “Thus says the Lord, let my people go...” (Ex. 8:20). Bonhoeffer credits his experience in this African-American church with his felt “call” to go back to Germany to act in solidarity with the Jewish struggle against the Third Reich. This decision ultimately cost him his life, as he was executed by the Third Reich for his actions. Bonhoeffer's primary involvement in the ecumenical movement was to raise awareness of the injustices to Jews that was prevalent under Hitler's regime, and to introduce the idea of religious leaders as social agents of change. Bonhoeffer's execution by the Third Reich just a week before Hitler's assassination made him a martyr and one of the most respected theologians in the world. As illustrated by Bonhoeffer's theological growth and change, this shift in theological formulations about, and actions for, oppressed peoples occurred during an age that was also quite tumultuous and transformational in the South American Christian Church. His theology and actions, as well as others like him, would very likely have also been known to Ignacio Martín-Baró in South America.

**South American Liberation Theology.** As an official school of theological thought and action, Liberation Theology was born in South America during the 20th century (Ferm, 1986). This theology cannot be understood apart from the sociopolitical and historical context in which it formed and grew. Ferm (1986) seems to best capture this important point by stating, “the violent history of Latin American colonization, in which the Catholic Church figured prominently, is of central importance for anyone attempting to grasp Latin American theological reflections on liberation”

(p. 3). This focus on context is at the heart of what made Liberation Theology a unique approach to the understanding and practice of the Catholic Christian faith. Although the majority of priests in the early South American Catholic Church acted in alliance with the sociopolitical movement to colonize the “New World”, there were priests such as Bartolomé de Las Casas that viewed their pastoral role to be in direct conflict with the way in which the indigenous peoples of Latin America were being savagely treated by colonizing forces (Ferm, 1986; Gutiérrez, 1988). After key events in the Catholic Church such as the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican in 1962, and the Latin American Episcopal Conference meeting in Medellín, 1968 (Ferm, 1986), priests were given the theological and political freedom to explore the implications of Christ’s teachings in regard to a “preference for the poor” (Gutiérrez, 1988; Martín-Baró, 1994). This focus on the poor was based on the belief that the suffering of the poor and oppressed was a reflection of a sinful societal structure. “How is it possible to tell the poor, who are forced to live in conditions that embody a denial of love, that God loves them?” (Gutiérrez, 1988, p. xxxiv).

Liberation Theologians and their followers worked through the use of base communities (i.e., *comunidades eclesiales de base*). These communities ranged from just a dozen or so people, to a few hundred. In essence, they were gatherings of Catholics, who most often lived in impoverished contexts, that met to worship and talk about Biblical truths in light of their lived experience. The revolutionary aspect of the communities is that they were lead and managed by lay Church members. There was a vast shortage of priests, and as such “regular” Church members began to lead these communities in worship and critical reflection of the Gospel. What resulted many times were local social movements to improve living conditions through activities such as building sewer systems, or protesting unfair land ownership laws. In addition, Liberation Theologians used the institutions of higher education in South America as a platform for furthering the development of this movement (Ferm, 1986; Martín-Baró, 1991). The goal of using both of these methods was to strive toward critical reflection of the Catholic Christian faith and theology based on the lived experience of the poor and oppressed. This critical reflection was conceptualized as a holistic approach in support of living a fully authentic Christian life as exemplified by Jesus and his alliance with the poor and oppressed within human history. “Theological reflection would then necessarily be a criticism of society and the Church insofar as they are called and addressed by the Word of God; it would be a critical theory, worked out in the light of the Word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose –

and therefore indissolubly linked to historical praxis” (Gutiérrez, 1988, p. 9). This approach was a purposeful reorientation of the source of theology that would include both the Vatican and the oppressed themselves in the discovery and articulation of theological truths. This focus on the lived experience of those who are oppressed is at the heart of Ignacio Martín-Baró’s work.

**Martín-Baró’s Liberation Theology.** Martín-Baró’s (1994) own view of liberation theology (he was a Catholic priest that studied in this tradition) informed his creation of the foundations of Liberation Psychology. He believed that Liberation Theology was built on three basic principles:

- (1) “The Christian faith in a God of life must search, consequently, for all those historical conditions that give life to people...this search for life demands a first step of liberating structures, social structures first, and next personal ones, that maintain a situation of sin”;
- (2) “Actions are more important than affirmations in liberation theology, and what one does is more expressive of faith than what one says. In this context, everything becomes meaningful that mediates the possibility of people’s liberation from the structures that oppress and impede their life and human development”;
- (3) “Christian faith calls for a preferential option for the poor. The option for the poor is not opposed to the universal salvation, but it recognizes that the community of the poor is the theological place par excellence for achieving the task of salvation, the construction of the Kingdom of God.” (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 26)

These principles are similar to those that flow from Liberation Theology and larger forces of social action in the Church, but were Martín-Baró’s unique interpretation of Liberation Theology. These principles serve as a foundation for his development a psychology of liberation.

### Principles of Liberation Psychology

Liberation psychology was first articulated by Martín-Baró (1994), and has been further developed in significant ways by others such as Martiza Montero from Venezuela (Montero, 2009; Montero & Sonn, 2009). There are several foundational principles of Liberation Psychology which form the basis of this approach to understanding and acting with oppressed populations. Each of these principles will be described through the work of Martín-Baró, as well as subsequent academics and practitioners. Although there is overlap among these principles, each has a quality that adds something unique to this theory. Throughout all of these

is the central theme found in Liberation Theology – a centering of professional intention and practice on the lived experience of the poor and oppressed.

**Re-orientation of psychology.** In the context of South America, Martín-Baró (1994) argued that Western psychology had very little to offer in terms of the region's severe and oppressive circumstances. Based on his thinking and experience as a liberation theologian, he argued that, in order for psychology to be relevant to the mental health concerns it purports to address, it must be reoriented toward the lived experience of those who experience the most extreme of these conditions. Further, he argued that the poor and oppressed of South America were victims of structural, sociopolitical oppression that was the primary cause of the region's social and individual psychological problems. As such, he proposed a psychology of liberation that would address these psychological maladies through addressing their sociopolitical etiology. This process begins with a historical analysis of what brought these structural problems to bear.

**Recovering historical memory.** This term refers to the process in which the social scientist participates in the rediscovery of oppressed populations' shared history. For many oppressed populations, particularly those who have been subject to colonization by alien societies and cultures, history is written from the perspective of the oppressor (Martín-Baró, 1994; Wilson, 1993). This is a critical component of Liberation Psychology in that, without an understanding of the actual etiology of the oppression and subsequent conditions, true understandings from the perspective of the oppressed cannot be attained. The most critical aspect of this principle is that the investigation of societal structures and recovery of actual historical memory be conducted by those who are oppressed in partnership with social scientists and practitioners.

**De-ideologizing everyday experience.** Martín-Baró (1991; 1994) pointed out that dominant social forces in South America used several outlets (e.g., the Church, media campaigns and governmental bureaucracies) to establish "realities" about the lived experience of the poor and oppressed. These messages maintained what he called a "cultural stranglehold" on the way in which such circumstances are studied and understood by social scientists. As such, Martín-Baró (1994) posited that a key step in achieving a socially just and mentally healthy context for these populations was to investigate these dominate messages in light of the lived experiences of those living on the margins. Montero (2009) describes this process as "the conscious construction and reconstruction of an understanding of the world one lives in, and of one's lived circumstances, as part of a totality" (p. 75). By engaging in the de-ideologizing

process, both social scientists and oppressed populations can begin to make sense of their current situation in light of recovered historical memory, as well as an analysis of everyday experience.

**Virtues of the people.** Martín-Baró (1994) pointed out that it is crucial to utilize the virtues of oppressed peoples when working to improve their lived experience. He described the virtues of the oppressed people of his own country, El Salvador, by marveling over "their ability to deliver and to sacrifice for the collective good, their tremendous faith in the human capacity to change the world, [and] their hope for tomorrow that keeps being violently denied to them" (p. 31). Such strengths and resilience has also been displayed by oppressed peoples in the U.S. (e.g., Consoli, López, Gonazales, Cabrera, Llamas, & Ortega, 2011). This strengths-based approach allows the social scientist to depend on those who are oppressed to produce the tools and energy that may lead to liberation. Further, utilizing the virtues of oppressed peoples takes the tools that have been used to cope with oppressive circumstances for generations, and transforms them for use as an indispensable tool for liberation.

**Problematization.** This process is best described as a method for understanding a particular issue faced by oppressed populations from their own perspective. Although Martín-Baró (1994) includes problematization as critical aspect of his theory, he and other liberation psychologists (e.g., Jiménez-Domínguez, 2009; Montero, 2009) point toward Freire (1970) as the originator of this process. In short, problematization focuses the content of recovered historical memory, a de-ideologized understanding of current circumstances, and knowledge of a people's virtues onto a particular issue that a group of oppressed individuals are experiencing in a specific context. The professionals utilizing Liberation Psychology seeks to present "problems" in terms of conflicts between the lived experience of these individuals, and their beliefs about what should be (Martín-Baró, 1994). This is similar to the notion in Liberation Theology of comparing one's lived experience with Biblical truth (Gutiérrez, 1988). What is critical for this process of problematization is the use of information and shared knowledge that is discovered during the process of recovering historical memory, the de-ideologizing of everyday experience, and capitalizing on the virtues of the people. Without this process, any understanding of a given problem will remain rooted in oppressive and marginalizing philosophies and histories.

**Concientization.** The primary goal of Liberation Psychology is the awakening of critical concientization (i.e., critical consciousness) in the person/group. Once again, Martín-Baró (1994) credits Freire (1970)

with the creating the notion of *concientization*. He incorporated this concept from Freire's new pedagogy of the oppressed into his foundations for a psychology of liberation. Martín-Baro (1991) suggests that critical consciousness "is not simply becoming aware of a certain fact, but rather it is a process of change" (p. 227). In other words, to become conscious of reality in this sense is to become aware of, and involved in, a process of continual discovery and action related to "truth". Through rediscovering historical memory, de-ideologizing understandings of cultural truths, discovering the virtues of the people, and applying this knowledge to specific contexts and lived experiences through problematization, the process of critical consciousness emerges and is maintained. Furthermore, Montero and Sonn (2009) describe liberation through *concientization* as

a process entailing a social rupture in the sense of transforming both the conditions of inequality and oppression and the institutions and practices producing them. It has a collective nature, but its effects also transforms the individuals participating, who, while carrying out material changes, are empowered and develop new forms of social identity. It is also a political process in the sense that its point of departure in the *concientization* of the participants, who become aware of their rights and duties within the society, developing their citizenship and critical capacities, while strengthening democracy and civil society (p. 1).

*Concientization* is also never complete, but instead "brings with it the possibility of a new praxis, which at the same time makes possible new forms of consciousness" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 40). This ongoing process of liberatory praxis between theory and action forms the foundation on which Liberation Psychology rests.

**Praxis.** This is a core foundational construct of Liberation Psychology. In essence, praxis is the confluence of theory and action. Within this framework, one cannot exist without the other. The critical consciousness that arises from reclaiming one's history, de-ideologizing understandings of cultural truths, discovering the virtues of the people, and using that as a method for making sense of current oppressive circumstances (i.e. problematization) is only made "real" when it is applied in action to current lived experiences in the effort to liberate self and others from these circumstances. Watkins and Shulman (2008) describe this tension between a critical view of the past and a creative view of the future. "One motion is deconstructive and critical, looking backward at what we have been doing and thinking that is dysfunctional, dissociative, and destructive; the other motion is moving forward,

toward new capacities for imagining, voicing, connecting, empathizing, and celebrating self and others in community" (pp. 28-29). This view of praxis, reflection and action together, is another way to describe truth embodied in the present moment. Truth is worked out in every moment that critical consciousness is experienced during a particular point in time. And in Martín-Baró's (1994) view, this type of truth is only accurate when it is acted out in partnership with those to which it directly applies. This notion of praxis is an echo of Liberation Theology's notion of *orthopraxis*, which emphasizes that divine Truth is revealed through an active and deliberate connection between prayerful Biblical reflection and social action (Gutiérrez, 1988).

**Transformation of the social scientist.** Underlying all of these principles of Liberation Psychology is the call, and necessity, for the psychologist, counselor, or other social scientist to also be engaged in these liberating processes on a personal level. Within this framework, there is no objective observer or removed theorist. In order for a psychology to be "true", it must come from the engaged, praxis-based perspective of those it purports to describe and help. This requires that the social scientist's role "becomes that of a convener, a witness, a coparticipant, a mirror, and a holder of faith for process through which those who have been silenced may discover their own capacities for historical memory, critical analysis, utopian imagination, and transformative social action" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 26). What flows from this idea is that all social science research or practice should move toward social changes and the improvement of oppressive circumstance for participants and clients. Further, this change should be based on, and driven by, the experience, understandings, and actions of these very same peoples.

Liberation Psychology's focus of placing top priority on social change and active engagement with oppressed populations also calls into question the "publish or perish" ideals of Western academia. Social scientists operating from a Liberation Psychology perspective would be primarily focused on the client or participant-centered transformation of communities, rather than improving their own credentials. This is not to demonize or objectify social scientists in the pursuit of published scholarship as the "bad people". In fact, without published articles and books about Liberation Psychology, furthering its use and development would be nearly impossible. What Martín-Baró's (1991) suggests is that social scientists and practitioners should critically reflect and act on the oppressive set of higher education structures and norms that prioritize building credentials over pursuing liberatory change for oppressed populations. By reflecting on these structures, and publishing research that is based on praxis-focused

engagement with marginalized populations, it may be possible to begin liberating the academic system, and those within it, as well.

Liberation Psychology has deep roots in the broad social action traditions of the Christian Church, as well as the specific actions of Liberation Theologians in South America. These roots can be seen in the principles of critical reflection on oppressive circumstances, actions to change these circumstances, and the supportive role the psychologist, counselor, or other social scientist plays in this praxis. These traditions have also found fertile ground for further growth and development in field of professional counseling.

### Liberation Psychology's Influence on Counseling

Social justice has become an increasingly popular and pervasive focus in the realm of counseling. There are social justice related counseling related books (e.g., Ellis & Carlson, 2009; Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar & Israel 2006), professional organizations (e.g., Counselors for Social Justice), and academic journals (e.g., *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*) that are wholly dedicated to this end. While there are several theories and movements that have contributed to this new wave of thinking in counseling, the contributions of Liberation Psychology can also be clearly seen as one of the foundations on which this movement is based. These contributions can be seen in several areas.

Emancipatory Communitarianism (Prilleltensky, 1997) is an example of a theory that has been used to construct social just counseling methods. This theory is, among other factors, an integration of Liberation Psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994) and communitarianism (Etzioni, 1991; Sandel, 1996). This theory has been used to further socially just counseling in a general sense (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; Toporek, 2009), for group counseling with homeless adults (Brubaker, Garrett, Torres Rivera & Tate, 2010), for teaching counseling theories in counselor education (Brubaker, Puig, Reese & Young, 2010), and in regard to career counseling and development (Blustein, 2006; Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005; Diemer & Ali, 2009; Fassinger & Gallor, 2006). For example, Brubaker, Garrett, Torres Rivera and Tate (2010) developed a group counseling framework for working with adults who are homeless. The first stage of this group intervention is intended to facilitate empowerment for clients by deconstructing personal histories. "With the group's help, these clients began to identify their community's local history (e.g., anti-homeless ordinances) as well as values characteristic of dominant U.S. culture

(e.g., Protestant work ethic) and how these factors have affected them. In turn, this allowed clients to recognize their own negative beliefs about self and others who share these experiences leading to homelessness" (p. 127). The authors argue that this process increases critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Martín-Baró, 1994), and creates a context for healing in light of recovering the historical etiology of the situation at hand.

Liberation psychology has also had an influence the field of counseling and development directly through the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró. These include the creation of an academic journal inspired, in part, by the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró (Sloan & Toporek, 2007), interventions for Latina victims of domestic violence (Perilla, Serrata, Weinberg & Lippy, 2012), career counseling for victims of intimate partner violence (Chronister & Davidson, 2010; Chronister & McWhirter, 2006), peace and reconciliation group work in Southeast Asia (Norsworthy & Buranajaroekij, 2011; Norsworthy & Khuankaew, 2004), as well as guidelines for culturally relevant counseling interventions in general (Duran, Firehammer & Gonzalez, 2008). As an example, Martín-Baró's (1994) direct influence on counseling can be seen in Chronister and Davidson's (2010) approach to group career counseling with survivors of intimate partner violence. These authors hold out critical consciousness as a primary goal for both group members and the group leaders, and state that "[w]e believe, as have activists and scholars before us, that the development of critical consciousness is an act of liberation" (p. 122). This career group was designed to develop critical consciousness with clients by engaging them in a critical, collaborative dialogue. Specifically, clients were asked to have open dialogue, connect with the common experiences of others, analyze the sociopolitical context that surrounded their abuse and career/job concerns, and to take action for themselves and others in similar oppressive circumstances. This example illustrates a goal to liberate clients to change themselves and their oppressive contexts, rather than simply "fixing" their presenting concerns.

The field of career counseling and development also has been particularly influenced by Liberation Psychology (Blustein, 2006; Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005; Chronister & Davidson, 2010; Chronister & McWhirter, 2006; Diemer & Ali, 2009; Fassinger & Gallor, 2006). For example, Diemer and colleagues (2006) found that adolescents' critical consciousness about their career development increased when they were supported in the process by key social actors. In a sense, this focus on social justice is a return the original roots of the career development and counseling field. Frank Parson, one of the originators of the modern counseling profession in the United States, was engaged

in social justice counseling during the late 19th century as he attempted to aid marginalized individuals and groups in obtaining substantial and meaningful work lives (Hartung & Blustein, 2002; Pope, 2000).

### **Counseling for Liberation Illustrated - Career Exploration and Liberation**

While understanding Liberation Psychology's roots, as well as its general influence on the counseling field, is instructive and enlightening, a more detailed example might prove more illustrative. As such, we will outline an example of using this theory to counsel for liberation – a career exploration counseling group for first generation, low-income college students (this group was designed and implemented by the first and fourth author of this article). This population of students is among the least likely to graduate college in the U.S. (Thayer, 2000), and faces significant barriers and challenges on campus that are unique to their marginalized status (Hertel, 2002; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005). This population of students also consist of disproportionately high numbers of traditionally marginalized and oppressed racial and ethnic groups, which face significant discrimination on their own terms (Butler, Shillingford, & Alexander-Snow, 2011; Sue & Sue, 2003; Torres, O'Conner, Meja, & Long, 2011). Liberation Psychology was used as a frame for developing a career exploration counseling group in order to support such students in the process of exploring and choosing a potential career path. Using Liberation Psychology is particularly relevant given that this population faces challenges because college campuses and systems are constructed by and for those who come from a college-educated family background. Moreover, this population of students represent a segment of society that has been excluded from educational, career, and economic opportunities over the generations. By intervening with these students, it might be possible to redress such societal inequalities in partnership with such students, which is consistent with the goals of Liberation Psychology.

This group consisted of six sessions which took place over the course of one academic semester. The first session was focused on a discussion of the sociopolitical context of the campus in which these students lived and studied (a predominately White, upper/middle-class, private university). Specifically, students were shown a video of other first generation, low-income college students on campus discussing their experiences of racism and discrimination, and how these experiences affected their academic life. This process was designed to recover historical memory that has been lost in the dominant campus narrative. Stu-

dents were encouraged to agree or disagree with what was said on the video, and to talk through what these issue might mean for their career path now, and in the future (*de-ideologization*). During the next session, the recovery of historical memory and de-ideologizing process continued, wherein students created a visual map of the messages they have received from their family, community, and society-at-large about which career(s) they should or could pursue. This map consisted of concentric circles in which students wrote down these messages. The students were then asked to talk through and make sense of patterns in these messages, and to dialogue about what influence these messages have had, and should have, on their career paths. The third session was focused on revealing and capitalizing on the strengths (i.e., *virtues of the people*) these students bring to their career development process. Specifically, the students were asked to consider the strengths and resources that allowed them to persist in college up to this point given the many challenges and barriers they have faced in comparison with other legacy college students. Based on this idea, they created a strengths crest/mandala that illustrated their strengths. The group facilitators then asked the students to consider these strengths and how they might be used in both their career exploration process and their future careers in general.

The fourth session was focused on interpreting a career interest assessment the students completed. It should be noted that the use of a career assessment was intentionally not used until late in the career exploration process. This is an example of how using Liberation Psychology shifts traditional counseling. Rather than beginning with an assessment designed by career development "experts" and then using that information to guide the counseling process, using Liberation Psychology requires that a counselor begins by collaboratively analyzing the sociopolitical context and strengths of the clients. So, during this fourth session the students were asked to consider the results of the assessment in light of the information revealed and analyzed in previous sessions. During session five, the facilitators attempted to engage the process of *problematization*. Students were asked to openly discuss their thoughts on possible careers in light of the sociopolitical context, their strengths, and their career interests and values. The facilitators had no content agenda for this session, but rather attempted to facilitate a process of critical, supportive dialogue. Toward the end of the session, the facilitators explained that this was the process wherein students might engage in *concientization* as they move toward and make choices about a possible career. The final session involved a termination ritual wherein students were asked to talk about what they learned

about themselves and others in the group, and were asked to make a commitment to concrete steps toward their career exploration process. In between all these sessions, students were asked to think and journal about the topics discussed in session, and their reflections about experiences that occurred between sessions were included at the beginning of each subsequent session. This was done to engage students in *praxis* – thinking about and acting on their increasing critical consciousness of their career development process.

This illustration demonstrates one possible implementation of Liberation Psychology to inform counseling practice. While this career counseling group infused several Liberation Psychology components, it, by no means, should be considered a template to be used across populations or contexts. In fact, the context-specific nature of Liberation Psychology requires that each implementation should be specific to a particular setting, issue, and population. So, when considering this example as a way to inform other counseling interventions, it is important to focus on the client and the context rather a “pure” implementation of the theory. Such is the spirit of Liberation Psychology specifically and the social justice movement in general.

### Implications

The various uses of Liberation Psychology as a foundation for professional counseling demonstrate the legacy of this theory in regard to the social justice movement in the counseling field. There are several important issues that arise as a result of using liberation psychology as a foundation for counseling. These include the importance of recovering historical memories associated with the counseling profession, the role of the counselor as a process expert, the blurred line between counseling and social action, and the political nature of Liberation Psychology.

As Martín-Baró (1994) and others (Jiménez-Domínguez, 2009; Montero, 2009) suggest, communities must rediscover and reclaim their histories in order to be liberated from sociopolitical structures of oppression. This manuscript serves as an effort to seek out the history of social justice in the field of professional counseling. For example, as mentioned earlier, Frank Parsons is sometimes credited as being one of the originators of the modern counseling profession (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). His work was grounded in strengths, development, prevention, and systemic change. Professional counselors would be well-served to look more systematically at such past events and persons in the effort to recover historical memory that has been lost in the modern movement toward remedial interventions, clinical diagnoses, and third-party

payment for services. For example, in addition to Parson’s foundational work toward counseling for social justice, there are many philosophical and theological traditions that have made an impact on the contemporary social justice movement in counseling. Black Liberation Theology (Cone 1985; 2008), feminism (e.g. hooks, 2008), Afrikan-centered psychology (Wilson, 1993), and many other frameworks have affected our profession in significant ways. A historical analysis of these traditions’ influence on counseling for social justice may help to move toward a collective critical consciousness in our profession, and, as Martín-Baró (1994) says, this process “brings with it the possibility of a new praxis, which at the same time makes possible new forms of consciousness” (p. 40).

When viewing the counseling process through the lens of Liberation Psychology, the role of the counselor shifts away from that of “expert” on etiology and healing. Rather, the counselor takes on the role of process expert. As Watkins and Shulman (2008) suggest, the role of the counselor shifts toward claiming and utilizing expertise about a process that allows oppressed peoples to create their own definitions of etiology and healing. Torres Rivera, Phan, Maddux, Wilbur, and Garrett (2001) have also suggested that focusing on process in counseling is a crucial component of multicultural competent counseling. With this shift toward a focus on process, counseling for liberation would involve guiding clients through a *process* of problematization based on the *content* that flows from a sociopolitical and historical analysis of the presenting concern, and the use of the clients’ strengths to invoke the critical consciousness process.

The use of Liberation Psychology in counseling may also sometimes blur the line between reflective work in counseling sessions, and action-oriented work in the community. For example, Norsworthy and Khuankaew (2004) facilitated a group intervention, based in part on Liberation Psychology, designed to address gender-based violence in Burma. While their approach contained traditional components such as self-reflection and normalization exercises, it also had components intended to create client-driven systemic change in the communities in which participants lived. These authors acknowledged this unique feature as they described the group categories their intervention fell within. “The groups have particular foci, analyzing structural violence against women and developing action plans aimed at social change (task group). They also increase participants’ knowledge and skills regarding self-care, facilitate emotional well-being in the face of significant stress, and increase social support (psychoeducational group). Group members also derive therapeutic benefits, such as group support, empowerment through

naming the problems, developing solutions, encountering the universality of their experiences, and releasing difficult thoughts and feelings within a well-developed holding environment” (pp. 260-261). This expression of Liberation Psychology through group counseling may also provide a vibrant example for operationalizing some components of the advocacy competencies put forward by the American Counseling Association (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002).

Finally, the inherently political nature of Liberation Psychology may be easily confused for contemporary notions of politics (e.g. Democrats vs. Republicans). This misinterpretation is problematic in terms of understanding how this theory is operationalized in counseling. Jiménez-Domínguez (2009) offers a clarification on this issue when he states, “objectivity must not be confused with impartiality. One cannot be impartial in the face of injustice. However, in order for our efforts to be effective and to fulfill their aims, we must not collapse into subjectivity, which leads to political pamphleteering and mere public catharsis” (p. 39). In terms of counseling, this means that, although counselors may take a stand against injustice, they must nonetheless strive for an objective view of the situations and clients at-hand.

### Conclusion

The origins of the social justice movement in contemporary professional counseling are a complex mosaic of philosophical, professional, and spiritual traditions. This manuscript has provided a brief summary of Liberation Psychology, and its contribution to this mosaic. These authors hope that this reflection on the history of counseling for social justice will provide a foundation and motivation for counselors to “assume a critical commitment to the process of change; ‘commitment’ because we cannot ignore the injustice which affects the majority, but ‘critical’ because we must establish both a way to analyze reality and to develop a process to change it” (Jiménez-Domínguez, 2009, p.40).

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