

Chapter 18

The Role of Critical Theory in the Development of Multicultural Psychology and Counseling

Joseph C. Chen
DePaul University, USA

ABSTRACT

The discipline of psychology has historically been based upon Western, Eurocentric perspectives on human behavior. Critical theory has played a central role in pushing psychology out from its insularity and perceived objectivity. This chapter examines the role of critical pedagogist Paolo Freire and liberation psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró in the shaping of a multicultural perspective within psychology that has revolutionized the way that psychologists understand and treat mental health conditions. Freire and Martín-Baró gave voice to the marginalized and disenfranchised and pushed psychologists to engage in their own conscientization of their history and complicitness in perpetuating oppression. Implications of their work are examined in light of their contributions to theoretical underpinnings, clinical diagnosis, and treatment approaches.

INTRODUCTION

A cursory review of human history is littered with examples of oppression and the resultant cycles of suffering and conflict. A significant, though minimally researched, consequence of oppressive cycles is harm to mental health. In this chapter, I examine the detrimental impact of oppression on mental health and the instrumental role of critical theory in the development of what is known as the “fourth force” and the “fifth force” in applied psychology, multiculturalism and social justice, respectively. These forces ushered in a new psychological era of understanding human behavior and mental health out from its historically individualistic focus to a more systemically and culturally-inclusive perspective that eminently placed culture and sociopolitical oppression at the heart of mental health for persons of color, and championed advocacy and social action as a means toward improved mental health.

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Especially influential in the development of a multicultural and social justice perspective within psychology was the sociopolitical contexts of Latin America in the twentieth century, the genesis of the work of critical pedagogist, Paulo Freire, and liberation psychologist, Ignacio Martín-Baró. Their work centrally placed the role of oppression as the backbone in conceptualizing mental health treatment by setting the foundational stage to challenge hegemonic bases of the traditional theories and schools of psychological thought; Eurocentric views of human behavior, the origins of modern psychology, were being perceived as ineffective and potentially harmful to patients of color. Critical psychologists' main argument against dominant views of Western psychology was that mental health cannot be simply viewed through a strictly individually-based condition, and that improved mental health in patients of color, in particular, must include a recognition of systemic and institutional biases that perpetuate oppressed mindsets that manifest in psychological phenomena such as internalized racism and stereotype threat. Furthermore, critical psychologists argued that improved mental health and emotional healing are inextricably linked to engaging in social action that confronts systemic injustice. This was a revolutionary paradigm shift as it upended traditional psychological perspectives of understanding human behavior, which heavily preferred both study and treatment of mental health decontextualized from the social world. Freire's conscientization was vital in ushering in the multicultural movement because the nature of his educational process involved components that mirrored the psychotherapy process: an internal transformation of the mind that fundamentally changes and alters a person's behavior and course of life. Conscientization provided a useful tool that bolstered Martín-Baró's spirited arguments against Western psychology through an unexpected pathway: to free psychologists' hegemonic views (i.e., the oppressors) by means of participatory research in understanding and validating the perspectives of those oppressed. Martín-Baró forced an introspection within Western psychology that has upended generations of thinking on the foundations of mental health, and his work is the disciplinary bridge that has helped connect critical theory to the multicultural and social justice movement in psychology.

Oppression

Oppression is the systematic mistreatment, exploitation, and lowering in status of a group (or groups) by another group (or groups) (Charlton, 1998). It occurs when a group holds power over others in society by maintaining control of social institutions, and society's laws, rules, and norms. The dominant group subordinates the oppressed group via both "political, external, and corporal means and also through imbuing internalized, psychological devaluation of self" (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996, p. 30). Oppression functions at multiple levels of interactions including intrapersonal (e.g., internalized racism), interpersonal (e.g., abuse and threats), social (e.g., dehumanizing of a group), state (e.g., institutional racism, structural inequalities), and international (e.g., exploitation of impoverished nations, world order agendas) (Holmes, Facemire, & DeFonseca, 2016). While oppression is often thought of in terms of race and culture, it also includes situations involving sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, and age.

The origins of oppression can be traced back about 12,000 years ago at a crucial juncture of human survival and ingenuity (Deutsch, 2006; Harvey, 1999). Humans have historically been hunters and gatherers for their survival, and life revolved around the main priority of finding and obtaining food. Individual roles within a group were all related to the pursuit of food and nourishment. However, as the human population grew, humans needed different and better ways of obtaining food – it was increasingly difficult to efficiently move larger groups of people. This need resulted in the development of

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