

Special Thematic Section on "Decolonizing Psychological Science"

Decolonizing Psychological Science: Introduction to the Special Thematic Section

Glenn Adams^{*a}, Ignacio Dobles^b, Luis H. Gómez^c, Tuğçe Kurtiş^d, Ludwin E. Molina^a

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA. [b] Escuela de Psicología, Universidad de Costa Rica, San José, Costa Rica. [c] Escuela de Psicología, Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, Heredia, Costa Rica. [d] Department of Psychology, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA, USA.

Abstract

Despite unprecedented access to information and diffusion of knowledge across the globe, the bulk of work in mainstream psychological science still reflects and promotes the interests of a privileged minority of people in affluent centers of the modern global order. Compared to other social science disciplines, there are few critical voices who reflect on the Euro-American colonial character of psychological science, particularly its relationship to ongoing processes of domination that facilitate growth for a privileged minority but undermine sustainability for the global majority. Moved by mounting concerns about ongoing forms of multiple oppression (including racialized violence, economic injustice, unsustainable over-development, and ecological damage), we proposed a special thematic section and issued a call for papers devoted to the topic of "decolonizing psychological science". In this introduction to the special section, we first discuss two perspectives—liberation psychology and cultural psychology—that have informed our approach to the topic. We then discuss manifestations of coloniality in psychological science and describe three approaches to decolonization—indigenization, accompaniment, and denaturalization—that emerge from contributions to the special section. We conclude with an invitation to readers to submit their own original contributions to an ongoing effort to create an online collection of digitally linked articles on the topic of decolonizing psychological science.

Keywords: coloniality, decolonial theory, epistemic violence, cultural psychology, liberation psychology, indigenization, accompaniment, denaturalization, colonial mentality

Resumen

A pesar de acceso sin precedentes a la información y difusión del conocimiento en todo el mundo, la mayor parte del trabajo en la ciencia psicológica hegemónica todavía refleja y promueve los intereses de una minoría privilegiada de personas en centros ricos del orden mundial moderno. En comparación con otras disciplinas de las ciencias sociales, hay pocas voces críticas que reflexionan sobre el carácter colonial Euro-Americano (nordocéntrico) de la ciencia psicológica, y en particular su relación con los procesos de dominación que facilitan el crecimiento de una minoría privilegiada, pero socavan la sostenibilidad de la mayoría global. Movido por preocupaciones sobre las múltiples formas actuales de la opresión (incluida la violencia racializada, la injusticia económica, el desarrollo insostenible y daño ecológico), propusimos una sección temática especial y emitimos una convocatoria para recibir artículos reflexivos dedicados al tema de la descolonización de la ciencia psicológica. En esta introducción a la sección especial, primero discutimos dos perspectivas—psicología de la liberación y psicología cultural—que han fundamentado nuestro acercamiento al tema. A continuación discutimos manifestaciones de la colonialidad en la ciencia psicológica y describimos tres enfoques para la descolonización—indigenización, acompañamiento y desnaturalización—que surgen de las contribuciones a la sección especial. Concluimos con una invitación a las/os/xs lectores a enviar sus propias contribuciones originales a este esfuerzo en movimiento para crear y continuar una colección electrónica de artículos digitales sobre el tema de la descolonización de la ciencia psicológica.

Palabras Clave: colonialidad, giro decolonial, opción decolonial, violencia epistémica, Psicología Cultural, Psicología de la Liberación, indigenización, acompañamiento, desnaturalización, mentalidad colonial

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2015, Vol. 3(1), 213–238, doi:10.5964/jssp.v3i1.564

Received: 2015-07-23. Accepted: 2015-07-27. Published (VoR): 2015-08-21.

Handling Editors: Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Department of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA; J. Christopher Cohrs, Jacobs University Bremen, Bremen, Germany

*Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, KS, 66045, USA. E-mail: adamsg@ku.edu



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So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature. ... But if we want humanity to advance a step farther, if we want to bring it up to a different level than that which Europe has shown it, then we must invent and we must make discoveries. ... For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new [hu]man. (Fanon, 1961/1965, p. 316)

In these last lines from the last chapter of his last book, revolutionary psychologist Franz Fanon (1961/1965) famously challenged researchers and practitioners with the critical task of decolonizing mainstream intellectual production as a crucial step toward broader decolonization and global revolution. Noting how prevailing understandings in mainstream academic spaces tended to reflect and promote interests of domination, Fanon called on scholars to articulate alternative understandings that were more conducive to human liberation.

Assessing intellectual progress in the half-century since Fanon's classic work, one might easily conclude that mainstream psychology—increasingly re-cast as psychological or brain science—has largely ignored his challenge or discredited it as political activism outside the bounds of proper scientific activity. The bulk of work in mainstream psychology still reflects and promotes the interests of a privileged minority of people in Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic (a.k.a. WEIRD; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) settings. Moreover, even when genuinely concerned researchers do look outside WEIRD settings and direct attention to experience of people in the “Majority World” (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996), they tend to do so in light of concepts, methods, and beliefs about normality that are rooted in the WEIRD realities that inform scientific and epistemic imagination. Compared to neighboring disciplines, there is relatively little attention to the ways in which the science can work as a primary site for the expression and reproduction of domination (e.g., via ideologies of individualism; see Becker & Marecek, 2008; Kurtiş & Adams, 2015, this section). Even those of us who identify as social or political psychologists typically proceed with academic business as usual with few opportunities to reflect on our participation (as both intellectuals and citizens) in ongoing processes of domination that promote exploration, expansion, and growth for a privileged few but undermine sustainable well-being for the vast majority of humanity.

Moved by the 50th anniversary of Fanon's book—as well as mounting concern about ongoing forms of multiple oppression including racialized violence, economic injustice and unsustainable overdevelopment with its inevitable ecological repercussions—the editorial team for the special thematic section proposed the theme of *Decolonizing Psychological Science* as an overdue response to Fanon's revolutionary challenge. The idea for the special section had its origins in a series of intellectual exchanges between present and former members of the Cultural Psychology Research Group at the University of Kansas and the Costa Rican Liberation Psychology Collective (whose

members include professors and researchers from both the University of Costa Rica and the National University in Costa Rica). The common thread that motivated the exchanges (and the resulting special section) was our respective experience working in marginalized settings of the Majority World, outside the WEIRD settings that typically inform mainstream or hegemonic forms of social and political psychology.¹

Scholars and researchers who work in the ivory-tower universities of affluent societies are typically insulated from the deprivation and violence of the (post)colonial realities that characterize everyday life, not only in marginalized settings of the Majority World, but also in communities of racialized Others hidden in plain sight within WEIRD settings (cf. Arnett, 2008). Even researchers in less affluent societies of the Global South tend to practice a sort of “scientific mimicry” (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 20) as they orient their work toward intellectual debates in academic centers of the Global North and away from realities of poverty that shape everyday life for the majority of people in their own societies (Martín-Baró, 1986). To work in such settings, psychologists have evolved methodological practices of “unknowing” (Geissler, 2013) and “epistemologies of ignorance” (e.g., Mills, 2007; cf. de Sousa Santos, 2007, 2009)—especially the tendency to imagine and study psychological experience as the self-contained product of individual organisms abstracted from historical and social context—that enable them to proceed with academic business-as-usual as if questions of colonial violence were problems of the distant past that need not impact “basic” scientific work.

In many cases, scholars and researchers who work in majority-world spaces and racially marginalized communities do not have this luxury of unknowing. For these researchers, everyday life is filled with constant reminders of what, following decolonial theorists (e.g., Grosfoguel, 2002; Mignolo, 2007, 2009, 2011; Quijano, 2000), we refer to as the *coloniality* of the modern global order. In contrast to the idea of the modern global order as the leading edge of intellectual progress and pinnacle of human development, references to coloniality emphasize the extent to which the modern global order—and the ways of being or habits of mind that are attuned to it—are the product of racialized power that continues to reproduce violence. From the epistemological standpoint of Majority World communities, the tendency to produce knowledge without reference to the coloniality of everyday life obscures more than it reveals about the “basic” psychological tendencies that modern science proposes as natural standards for human experience. Instead, the situation of everyday life makes understanding colonial violence—and its relationship to mainstream or hegemonic psychological science—a matter of critical importance.

Conceptual Resources for Decolonizing Psychological Science: Two Examples

Although mainstream intellectual production in hegemonic psychology has typically failed to appreciate how modern realities and associated ways of being are colonial products (let alone to provide a foundation for intellectual decolonization), there are bodies of work that provide conceptual resources for this purpose. In this introduction to the special thematic section, we discuss the conceptual resources from two such bodies of work—theoretical perspectives of liberation psychology and cultural psychology—that inform the editorial team’s approach to the topic.

Perspectives of Liberation Psychology: A Brief Introduction

Theoretical perspectives of liberation psychology are one set of conceptual resources that inform our approach to decolonizing psychological science. Various articulations of liberation psychology have emerged over the last 50 years as one of the most influential meta-theoretical perspectives in Latin American psychology (e.g., see [Burton & Kagan, 2005](#)). The Latin American character of the perspective is evident not simply as a description of its geographic distribution, but more profoundly as an “indigenous” or identity-conscious body of knowledge that emerges from local understandings and associated everyday realities that reflect the ongoing legacy of colonial violence.

There is vigorous debate between various liberation psychology perspectives, within and beyond Latin American settings, and it is beyond our scope here to review the variation in perspectives that go by the name (see [Barrero, 2012](#); [Burton & Gómez Ordóñez, 2015](#); [Dobles, Baltodano, & Leandro Zúniga, 2007](#); [Lacerda & Dobles, 2015](#); [Lykes & Moane, 2009](#); [Montero & Sonn, 2009](#); [Shulman & Watkins, 2008](#)). Rather than claim a definitive vision of liberation psychology, we focus on the particular articulation that emerges from work of Ignacio [Martín-Baró \(1994\)](#), who trained as a social psychologist at the University of Chicago and taught at the University of Central America (in San Salvador, El Salvador) until his assassination in 1989 by the U.S.-trained Atlacatl Battalion (a right-wing death squad; [Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, 1993](#)). In addition to his identity as a social psychologist, Martín-Baró was also a Jesuit priest who worked among impoverished communities in El Salvador. His articulation of liberation psychology results from the intersection of these identities: an application of social-psychological methods and insights toward the goal of social justice.

In the formulation of [Martín-Baró \(1994\)](#), one finds a recurring emphasis on core or definitional features of the liberation psychology perspective. One core feature is a way of knowing that privileges the epistemological position of people in oppressed or marginalized conditions. Another core feature is a participatory research ethos that emphasizes praxis over sterilized theory. These features bear the clear influence of Martín-Baró’s training as a Jesuit priest and the liberation theology perspectives that were circulating in the contexts where he worked ([Dussel, 1972](#); [Gutiérrez, 1971](#); [Sobrino, 1989](#)), especially the idea of a preferential option for the poor: that is, a commitment to treat the perspectives and interests of oppressed and impoverished communities as a primary source of insight about everyday truth and social reality. These features also bear the clear influence of contemporaneous Latin American scholarship such as Paulo [Freire’s \(1970/1993\) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*](#) and Orlando Fals-Borda’s ([1987, 1981](#)) work on critically engaged, participatory action research (PAR) methodologies.ⁱⁱ

Just as it is beyond our scope here to catalog different approaches to liberation psychology, it is likewise beyond our scope to review the work of Martín-Baró. Instead, we focus on a particular commentary in which [Martín-Baró \(1994, pp. 30-31\)](#) identified three urgent tasks for a liberation psychology.

De-Ideologizing Everyday Realities

A first urgent task is to reveal and disrupt the ideology of everyday realities. A liberation psychology perspective emphasizes that conventional representations of everyday events and experience are neither the neutral reflection of objective truth nor a “natural” reality. Instead they represent particular constructions of reality that reflect and serve the interests of the powerful. From this perspective, researchers can advance the cause of liberation by conducting research that exposes and counteracts the constructed, ideological nature of supposedly neutral or natural concepts.

One of the most important sites for this work of de-ideologization is within academic institutions and, in our case, challenging hegemonic perspectives of psychological science. Contrary to the rhetoric of scientific inquiry, scientific institutions and practices are not a transcendent or neutral enterprise disembedded from culture, politics, and power. Instead, science is a positioned form of knowledge that reflects the understandings and interests of people in positions of dominance (e.g., what is worthy of study, what counts as basic theory or narrow application, etc.). The production and reproduction of some understandings (and simultaneous silencing of others) is not a simple triumph of truth over ignorance, but often reflects the agenda of funding agencies and demands of various consumers of the scientific product. Moreover, the understandings that emerge from the knowledge-production process are not inert end-products, but typically direct subsequent activity towards ends consistent with the motivations for their original selection.

Although perspectives of liberation psychology critique the role of ideology and power in dominant institutions, including scientific production, one can also see in Martín-Baró's articulation the commitment to use empirical research as a liberatory tool. Rather than abandon science as a hopelessly tainted activity of the powerful, the call to de-ideologize everyday realities entails the use of empirical inquiry to collaborate with people to reveal the everyday truth of their experience. Indeed, Martín-Baró's own work (e.g., [Martín-Baró, 1985](#))—especially the creation of the University Institute of Public Opinion in the midst of the Salvadoran civil war ([Bollinger, 1990](#); [Dobles, 1990](#))—provides examples of empirical research as a tool for de-ideologizing conventional understandings of everyday realities, re-imagining societal arrangements, and resisting domination.

Recovering Historical Memory

An important mechanism of colonial domination has been forms of epistemic violence associated with the repression of local representations of history and identity and their replacement by imposition of colonizer understandings.ⁱⁱⁱ Drawing on the work of Orlando [Fals-Borda \(2013\)](#), a second urgent task for a liberation psychology has therefore been recovery of repressed historical memory. As [Martín-Baró \(1994, p. 30\)](#) put it,

The prevailing discourse puts forth an apparently natural and ahistorical reality, structuring it in such a way as to cause it to be accepted without question. This makes it impossible to derive lessons from experience and, more important, makes it impossible to find the roots of one's own identity, which is as much needed for interpreting one's sense of the present as for glimpsing possible alternatives that might exist ... The recovery of historical memory supposes the reconstruction of models of identification that, instead of chaining and caging the people, open up the horizon for them, toward their liberation and fulfillment.

Prevailing representations of history portray the modern global order as the product of cultural progress rather than colonial violence; portray WEIRD societies as vanguards of human development rather than accomplices in ongoing plunder (e.g., [Mattei & Nader, 2008](#)); and portray marginalized communities of the Majority World as abnormal or backward in relation to WEIRD standards. The recovery of historical memory counteracts institutional denial or collective forgetting of historical violence; raises awareness of viable alternatives to the colonial violence of the modern global order; and promotes constructions of identity that provide a sense of unity and purpose around these alternative understandings of history and progress.

“third-world women” (e.g., Mohanty, 1988) or “African” (Mudimbe, 1988). Indeed, critiques of Orientalist reification are themselves a decolonizing strategy to the extent that they make visible ways of knowing and being that look like an undifferentiated mass when viewed from the homogenizing colonial standpoint of mainstream science (for discussions of these ideas in psychological science, see Adams & Markus, 2004; Gjerde, 2004; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Okazaki, David, & Abelmann, 2008).

Funding

The primary source of funding for the project was a UCR-KU Collaboration Grant to Ignacio Dobles, Glenn Adams, and Ludwin E. Molina from the Vicerrectoría de la Investigación at the Universidad de Costa Rica and the Office of International Programs at the University of Kansas. Tuğçe Kurtiş also received funding in the form of a President’s Development Grant at the University of West Georgia.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

This work benefitted greatly from the critical engagement and epistemic community of the Costa Rican Liberation Psychology Collective and the Cultural Psychology Research Group at the University of Kansas. Siew Fang Law provided valuable suggestions as a reviewer of an earlier draft of the article. Glenn Adams acknowledges the early influence of conversations with the Culture and Critical Race discussion group at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University and its extension into Countering Colorblindness Across Disciplines seminars, especially Alfredo Artiles, Felice Blake, Justine Cassell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Jean-Claude Croizet, Jennifer Eberhardt, Leah Gordon, Lani Guinier, Luke Harris, Daniel HoSang, Paula Ioanide, Shinobu Kitayama, George Lipsitz, Hazel Markus, Claude Steele, and Barbara Tomlinson. His contributions to the project also benefitted from conversations with participants in the University of Kansas Hall Center for the Humanities 2015 Fall Faculty Colloquium on *Decolonizing Knowledge*. Luis Gómez acknowledges the Decolonial Studies Group and the Critical Alphabetization Project at the National University (Costa Rica), who shared debates, texts, and valuable insights throughout production of both the article and the special thematic section.

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