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What We Can Learn about Multiculturalism from Latin American Psychology

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Abstract

Latin American psychology, although greatly under-represented in international journals, can provide important lessons for international psychologists. Mexican psychologist Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero was one of the first to describe would now be labeled an indigenous psychology. Latin American theorists such as Paolo Freire and Ignacio Martín-Baró have provided frameworks for understanding diversity and multiculturalism among groups with unequal power. Only by critical thinking and critical analysis can we understand and challenge disparate conditions. Relatedly, Latin American psychology often focuses on achieving social justice and solving practical real-world problems. Thus, community and political psychology are strengths of Latin American psychology and have made contributions to the understanding of multiculturalism and activism. Finally, the high proportion of youth in Latin American countries makes their well-being a priority and innovative research has worked to identify and promote talent among young people. Examples of Latin American contributions, personal lessons learned, and suggestions for incorporating knowledge and perspectives from Latin America are highlighted.

What We Can Learn about Multiculturalism from Latin American Psychology

Amalia is a first-year student at Zamorano, an agricultural university in Central America[1]. Nineteen years old and from El Salvador, she received notice of her acceptance and full scholarship just before classes started. She was thrilled and her family was proud of her. The transition to Zamorano has opened new windows in terms of the people she has met and the comprehensive "learning by doing" education she has received. Amalia has acquired diverse skills and knowledge, ranging from baking bread to conserving environmental resources and combating climate change. She has learned to be responsible, to work hard, and to learn from her mistakes. In many ways, Amalia and her university experience represent Latin America in terms of its diversity, emphasis on practice, economic inequality, and the indigenous view of well-being as a commitment to maintain harmony with the environment.

In 2007, Montero and Díaz wrote, "Almost every Latin American country is multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual" (p. 65). In 2019, we need to eliminate the word "almost." All Latin American countries are multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual. People of indigenous descent are well-represented; about one sixth of the indigenous people of the world live in Latin America. The percentages are highest in Bolivia (62%) and Guatemala (nearly 50%) (López & Sichra, n.d.) and lowest in Uruguay (2.4%) (Central Intelligence Agency, CIA, 2018). Linguistic diversity is greatest in Brazil with approximately 180 indigenous languages and rather low in countries such as Nicaragua where Spanish is almost universally spoken (López & Sichra, n.d.). Beyond indigenous languages, the colonial history of Latin America has left not only Spanish, but also Portuguese, English, Dutch, and French as legacies. Latin America is also diverse in economic terms. Economic disparity—as measured by the Gini index—is high throughout most of Latin America. Of 157 countries of the world for which data are available, Guatemala, Paraguay, Colombia, Panama, Chile, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Bolivia ranked within the top thirty in economic disparity (CIA, 2018). Despite its diversity in terms of language, culture, ethnicity, and economic condition, Latin America[2] is greatly underrepresented in the psychological literature, especially in relation to multiculturalism.

Scarcity of Literature from Latin American in Psychology Databases

In the major databases for literature in psychology, research originating in Latin America is scarce (López, 2014). In a study using the PsyINFO database from 2001 to 2013, the absolute number of studies with a Latin American scholar as the primary author increased by almost ten-fold (from 390 to 3492). However, the percentage of Latin American-authored articles in the database never exceeded 2.5% (VandenBos & Winkler, 2015). In analyses of

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[1] For a short video of Amalia's story, see https://youtu.be/FNzAdKpI2gE
[2] In this chapter I am using a geographic definition of Latin America: Central and South America and Mexico.

the Scopus database from 2003 to 2008, approximately 2.1% of the articles included an author from Latin America (López-López et al., 2015; García-Martínez et al., 2012). Similarly, a study of articles published in prestigious developmental psychology journals from 2006 to 2010 revealed that fewer than one percent (0.7%) featured participants from Central or South America (Nielsen et al., 2017). Given that the Latin American percentage of the world's population is about 8.5%, this is a serious under-representation (Worldometers, 2018).

The majority of psychological scholarship in Latin America emanates from Brazil, a country with 216,000 professional psychologists as of 2015 (Gamba et al., 2015). Psychology research from Brazil made up over 50% of that from Latin America in 2013 (Gamba et al., 2015). Brazilian psychology has also had significant world-wide influence; it ranks 10th among the 30 most productive countries in the field of psychology. Articles published from Brazil are cited an average of 1.63 times, compared to those published in the Netherlands (6.36) or Mexico (1.59), the only other Latin American country ranked among the top 30 (Gamba et al. 2015).

Representation of Multiculturalism in Latin American Literature

Despite the diversity of cultures and languages in Latin America, psychological literature addressing multiculturalism specifically is similarly under-represented in Latin American Psychology. A PsycINFO search for multiculturalism revealed over 7000 articles. When concatenated with Latin America or the names of individual Latin American countries that number was reduced to 210 or less than 3%. Fewer than half of those references (110) were to peer-reviewed journal articles.

Because regional journals are often not indexed in the major psychological databases, new databases have emerged, notably SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online) initiated in Brazil, and Redalyc (Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina y el Caribe, España y Portugal) from Colombia. Searches in those open access databases revealed few studies using the term multiculturalism or *multiculturalismo,* its equivalent in Spanish. For example, a search of Redalyc revealed a total of 533 articles indexed by multiculturalism, but only four were from Latin America (two from Chile and two from Colombia). A similar search in SciELO yielded only 66 articles, of which the majority were outside the domain of psychology, and instead represented political science, education, or art. In sum, Latin American psychology has rarely addressed the issue of multiculturalism, despite its relevance to the region. There are many possible reasons for this, including language differences (much of the literature from Brazil is published in regional journals in Portuguese), the overall under-representation of Latin American psychology in journals, or what I will argue here – a difference in perspective regarding the manner in which cultural diversity should be addressed and studied.

Three Latin American Thinkers

Latin American psychology often begins with an historical analysis, and I will start here by recognizing three contributors to Latin American thinking and psychology who influenced

the direction of the field. Among them is Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero, one of the founders of the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP) (Diaz-Loving & Lozano, 2009). Among his accomplishments was the identification of a uniquely Mexican way of being, the psychology of the Mexican as he titled his book (Díaz-Guerrero, 1976). Díaz-Guerrero called that worldview historico-socio-cultural premises, that which is taken for granted by members of a culture. Today we would recognize his perspective as central to indigenous psychology, "the scientific study of human behavior or mind that is native, that is not transported from other regions, and that is designed for its people" (Kim & Berry, 1993, p. 2). Díaz-Guerrero's work continues to be cited today, not only as central to Mexican psychology (e.g. Knauer et al., 2017), but as a part of contemporary international psychology (e.g. Sayans-Jiménez et al., 2017).

Another influential Latin American thinker was Paolo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, who in his well-known book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), laid out new processes for education. He rejected the "banking approach" to education in which knowledge is piled into the recipient learner in favor of a critical approach in which the learner engages in concientization, development of a critical awareness that eventually leads to engagement in social transformation (Freire Institute, n.d.). In addition to promoting adult education with concientization as a route to social change, Freire also contributed to the emerging view that dialogue between researchers and community members is essential, a perspective that led to the beginnings of participatory action research (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Today, Freire's ideas have been applied not only to education and participatory action research, but have formed the bases of much of Latin American community psychology and political psychology (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Natale et al., 2016; Robles Lomeli & Rappaport, 2018; Rozas, 2015).

A third influential Latin American scholar was Ignacio Martín-Baró, a social psychologist at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in El Salvador. Tragically, in 1989 he was one of the Jesuit victims of the massacre at the UCA. Martín-Baró was a founder of liberation psychology, an outgrowth of liberation theology, in which the goal of psychological research and practice is social justice and relief from oppression (Martín-Baró, 1994). He once famously remarked, "In your country it's 'publish or perish;' in ours, it's 'publish and perish,'" (Levine, 2009) a statement which turned out to be prescient. Liberation psychology has influenced psychology in Latin America in a number of ways, including the use of participatory methods, the goal of social transformation, a focus on assisting victims of state oppression, and an emphasis on political realities (Burton & Kagan, 2005).

Some implementations of the liberation psychology perspective have been described by O'Connor et al. (2011). For example, in Guatemala, many members of Maya communities had suffered greatly from the 30-year brutal civil war. A culturally-appropriate process, based in liberation psychology that acknowledged the history of oppression and violence, was an effective alternative to standard treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998).

Characteristics of Latin American Psychology

Fundamental to virtually all of Latin American psychology is the assumption that groups that differ by culture, language, and ethnicity do not have equal power in society. Because of that inequitable social reality, a post-colonial history, and the influential thinkers mentioned above, Latin American psychology is characterized by specific foci and perspectives (e.g., Torres & Consoli, 2015). Those perspectives include:

(1) an emphasis on practical outcomes, sometimes referred to as praxis,
(2) the extensive use of community psychology and participative methods,
(3) the goal of achieving social justice,
(4) the study of political psychology as a way of documenting reality and possible routes for change,
(5) a youth-focused psychology, and
(6) "*buen vivir*" or a type of well-being based in harmony.

Most psychological research in Latin America is aimed at solving a practical problem or addressing a crisis. An example comes from Colombia. As a post-conflict society, Colombia has faced issues of peace-building, reintegration of soldiers and displaced persons, and promotion of forgiveness and reconciliation. Psychological researchers in Colombia have purposefully and strenuously addressed those challenges. For example, Ramírez et al. (2016) related the lived experiences of internally displaced persons to document not only the trauma they had experienced, but also paths of resilience including their potential as counselors for other displaced persons. Another group of scholars recognized the need for mental health services for both ex-FARC (Revolutionary armed forces of Colombia, a guerrilla movement that made peace with the government in 2016) combatants and their victims; the authors recommended inclusive community mental health programs (Idrobo et al., 2018). A series of studies has been undertaken in post-conflict Colombia about the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation (e.g., Castrillón-Guerrero et al., 2018; Cortés et al., 2016). Those studies revealed that justice was a requirement for forgiveness and reconciliation among victims of forced displacement, and that dialogue and religious faith could assist in the process. This is a powerful example of the engagement of psychological research to address pressing problems of society.

Another defining characteristic of Latin American psychology is the widespread adoption of community psychology, especially participatory methods as the major approach in interventions (Wiesenfeld, 2012). The key involvement of communities is emphasized in the definition put forth by Montero and Díaz, "[community psychology] is a branch of psychology [that takes] into account the historic, cultural, and social context of that community; its resources, capacities, strengths, and needs. CP is oriented towards the production of social changes according with those circumstances and involving the stakeholders' participation and commitment, in order to ensure that power and control are in their hands" (Montero & Díaz, 2007, p. 65). A participatory-action project in Quito, Ecuador (Rodríquez-Mancilla & Boada, 2016) addressed the use of public space in the historic center

of the city. The first stage involved interviews and questionnaires with local residents and other stakeholders. In the second stage, workshops were held concerning the emergent issues. The third and final stage was the implementation of changes, including construction of a center for community members, education for children on the history of the region, and provision of space for youth recreation. In other words, involvement of the community in the project led to concrete changes in the use of public space in the historic center of Quito.

A third feature of Latin American psychology is its attention to social justice as an outcome. In a study of Chilean youths' views of citizenship (Martínez et al., 2012) young people described ideal citizenship as an entity that reduced socio-economic inequities, advanced social transformation, and achieved social justice. In a Chilean study of transitional justice (measures implemented to redress human rights abuses during conflict), direct victims of the violence reported little confidence in the truth commission's ability to reach justice (Cárdenas et al., 2015). In both of these studies, social justice was an explicit goal of participants.

Political psychology—the intersection of political processes such as voting and civic engagement with human behavior and cognition—is a prominent and growing area among Latin American researchers (Ardila, 1996; Polo et al., 2014). Political psychology assumes its importance, in part, because of people's experiences in daily life, and its potential for addressing social needs (Ardila, 1996). In an early study in Nicaragua, researchers found that context was exceedingly influential in interviewee's responses to a survey. People adjusted their answers to the color of the pens used by the interviewers (colors being associated with particular political parties) and responded in accord with the perceived political bent of the interviewer (Bischoping & Schuman, 1992). More recent studies from political psychology in Latin America continue to propose political and legal avenues to resolving social problems (as opposed to changing individuals' behavior) (e.g. Lie et al., 2007; Meertens & Zambrano, 2010; Silva de Souza & dos Santos, 2017).

There are approximately 1.4 billion youth, ages 15 to 24, in the world today and they make up about 15.8 percent of the world's population (Population Reference Bureau, 2017). Although the highest proportions of the world's youth are in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America has a higher percentage than average, 17.2%. Within Latin America, the highest proportion is in Guatemala (21.3%), ranked 7th in the world for its proportion of youth (Population Reference Bureau, 2017).

A focus on the issues faced by young people is characteristic of many psychological studies in Guatemala. For example, a series of studies by Michelle Bellino have traced civic development in Guatemalan youth (Bellino, 2015, 2016, 2017). Her studies revealed that injustice often served as a starting point and that education facilitated youth's engagement in civic activities. Other researchers have concentrated on the practical issues faced by Guatemalan youth, including exposure to gangs (Cruz, 2010; Levenson, 2013) or forced return from the U.S.-Mexico border after attempts to immigrate (Argueta et al., 2015).

Youth have been the focus of another series of studies in Peru, a country in which the percentage of youth (ages 15-24) in the population (17.3%) is above the international average. Sheyla Blumen from Peru has been interested in identifying exceptionally talented youth (Blumen, 2008, 2016), as well as fostering their development. To that end, she studied

indigenous concepts of the qualities of giftedness and talent (Blumen, 2013). Among the indigenous people of the Andes, talent and skill were revealed in communal work, in interpersonal domains such as caring and sensitivity, and in personal qualities such as humility and strength of character. Talented youth contributed to their communities and to others, valued intuition and spirituality, and provided leadership through example (Blumen, 2013). In contrast, indigenous Peruvians from the Amazon region prioritized linguistic and spatial intelligence, skills needed to navigate the 64 local languages and surrounding jungle environment. A naturalist/spiritualist intelligence—the ability to foster and maintain connections with mother earth and other people—was also valued. Like the people of the Andes, people from the Amazon also valued interpersonal skills and the ability to get along with others. Schools and other programs can take advantage of those valued qualities to foster and promote the development of extraordinary talent among youth.

Buen vivir is a concept originating from indigenous populations in Latin America. Literally translated as "living well," it encompasses more than the idea of well-being, often translated as *bienestar*. *Buen vivir* comprises a philosophy of harmony and care, especially with respect to the environment. It has been incorporated into the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia as a guiding principle (Mercado, 2017). A study in rural Ecuador revealed that in general although people in households with low-income report lower subjective wellbeing, living in an indigenous community and growing one's own food can mitigate some effects of poverty (García-Quero & Guardiola, 2018). These results suggest that the philosophy of *buen vivir*, including close contact with nature and community support may potentially facilitate well-being. However, the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of *buen vivir* have yet to be extensively explored.

Alternative Views of Multiculturalism

According to a widely-used definition, multiculturalism is "an attitude related to the political ideology, which refers to the acceptance of and support for the culturally heterogeneous society" (Van de Vijver et al., 2008, p. 93). In a review of definitions of multiculturalism, Arasaratnam (2013) contends that all definitions include (1) a recognition of cultural differences and diversity in a plural society, and (2) support for such diversity. Contrast this perspective, however, with several views emanating from Latin America. The Guatemalan scholar Bastos not only includes the recognition of cultural differences as essential, but also specific actions including legal reforms and the design and implementation of new public policies (Bastos, 2008). From the perspective of Brazil, Loewe (2012) also emphasizes the legal actions that need accompany an ideology of multiculturalism, "In broad terms, multiculturalism is a normative program that affirms the positive value of cultures or cultural diversity, and aims to develop the legal mechanisms that protect them, encourage them and make them endure" (Loewe, 2012, p. 48).

Some Latin American scholars have been more critical of multiculturalism (e.g., Lopes, 2012). From Chile, Rozas (2016) criticizes multiculturalism on two fronts: (1) its lack of attention to the relation between communities, to the interculturality proposition that a

community is defined by its relation to others and (2) its obscuration of power differences between cultures. Costa (2011) from Brazil endorses a different form of multiculturalism, a critical multiculturalism that calls attention to the asymmetrical distribution of power. Her work is based on the critical, revolutionary, and postcolonial theories of McLaren (1997, 2000), that take as their starting point the inequities and unequal power between groups. According to Arias Alpizar (2008) from Costa Rica, multiculturalism can be a negative force, a discourse by dominant groups to evade the true causes of inequality among groups. An example comes from the celebration of the "discovery" of the Americas that was to be themed, "encounter of cultures," ignoring the domination, plunder, and oppression of the indigenous population by the colonizers (Rozas, 2016); the outcry from indigenous groups eventually led to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2008). Arias Alpizar (2008) also sees multiculturalism as a potentially positive force when it serves as a social and intellectual movement that illuminates the Eurocentrism and hegemony of the Western culture, laying claim to the right of other cultures to be recognized and respected. Although multiculturalism has been critiqued from within the Western perspective (e.g., Barry, 2013), the Latin American scholars provide a relatively uniform critique of multiculturalism. They are consistent in insisting that (1) a recognition of power differences and inequality are essential to an understanding of cultural differences, (2) the focus should be on relations between groups (interculturalism) rather than their distinctiveness (multiculturalism), and (3) specific actions such as legal reforms need to take place along with a simple recognition of multiculturalism. This particular view of multiculturalism seems to have emerged from the daily reality of economic disparity, unequal distribution of political power, and legacy of colonialism that has shaped Latin American thought.

Within Latin America the discussion of cultural differences and plural societies has taken place primarily with respect to indigenous populations. An example of a specific action taken in response to the recognition of indigenous peoples is the widespread endorsement of their rights. In 1989 the International Labour Organization (ILO) introduced the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, ILO C169. Among other provisions is the basic statement in Article 3 that, "indigenous and tribal peoples shall enjoy the full measure of human rights and fundamental freedoms without hindrance or discrimination" (ILO, 1989, para. 1). The convention also calls for the recognition and protection of social, cultural, religious and spiritual values and practices of indigenous peoples and for protection of their rights to the land that they have traditionally occupied. To date, the Convention has been ratified by Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. It has not been ratified by the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or any European country except Netherlands, Norway, and Spain.

In sum, with respect to multiculturalism, Latin America and the minority, Western world appear to be talking past each other. The dominant Western perspective on multiculturalism examines attitudes, individuals, acculturation, perceived threat, and diversity. The Latin American perspective emphasizes community, unequal power, practice, social justice, political action, and indigenous rights. What the Western or minority world might learn from

Latin America is (1) relations between groups are not neutral, but that power is almost always unequally distributed and those power differences prohibit dialogue on an equal footing, (2) the explicit goal of social justice can enable relations between groups, (3) communities and social groups are the relevant entities (rather than individual people) for discussion of multiculturalism, (4) political actions should be a mechanism for addressing inequities, and (5) the youth of the world afford the best opportunity for change (UNICEF, 2011). In the interests of mutual learning, of establishing learning partnerships, messages originating in Latin America should be considered.

If we return to the case of Amalia, she recognizes the advantage of multiculturalism to her education, including exposure to different ideas and diverse people. She has directly experienced advances in reducing social inequality with her full scholarship to a prestigious university. Her planned life course is to devote herself to the practical; feeding the world through agriculture. Consonant with the indigenous concept of *buen vivir*, she strives for harmony with the environment. Consistent with Freire, her education is not based on filling her with information, but rather "learning by doing," a practical, experienced-based pedagogy. Finally, Amalia herself represents an investment in youth as the driver of social change.

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