

LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGY

An Approach to the Reality of Traumatism in East Africa

Simone Lindorfer

ALMOST DAILY WE ARE CONFRONTED with news about people who are faced with life-threatening disasters, either through natural catastrophes and accidents or through war and other forms of violence. What links such experiences with one another is the way they shake people's faith in the security of their lives and the trustworthiness of human community. Psychology coined the expression 'trauma' (from the Greek for 'wound') to describe the possible psychological consequences of such experiences. Subsequently the diagnostic category of 'post-traumatic stress disorder' has become well known everywhere, even among non-professionals, as the most familiar (though not the only) disorder to result from traumatic events. The words 'trauma' and 'traumatized' have been part of the vocabulary of commentators and reporters writing about disasters for a long time.

Rape as a Message to the Losers

It is clear that the character of war has changed in the last five decades. With the 'new' wars in Africa the civilian population is at the centre of terrible conflict characterized by massacres and ethnic cleansing. A particularly disturbing phenomenon is the gender-specific violence that accompanies this conflict: the violence that women suffer from men on account of their sex. Such violence has existed as long as war among human beings; but it seems to be particularly endemic in these new wars. 'Enemy' women play an important part in the fighting; raping them is a powerful communication between men waging war. Their bodies are used as 'envelopes' to convey to the

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defeated the devastating message that they are unable to protect their women from the humiliation of sexual violation.

In East Africa, where I have been a trauma counsellor for nearly ten years, many church organizations are more or less professionally entrusted with the care of traumatized people. Classically, it is with the most existentially threatening life-experiences that people seek help from religion and spirituality, either from the Church or from traditional African religions. Trauma psychology summarises the abyss of such experiences, in which the normal, fundamental securities about 'God and the world' collapse, using the expression 'shattered assumptions'.¹ This abyss can be a place of great theological creativity and an inspiring 'sign of the times', in the sense meant by the Vatican II pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*. The systematic theologian Hans-Joachim Sander defines 'signs of the times' in the following way:

There are events in which people have to struggle for the recognition of their dignity; in such events it is decided whether a situation will become more human or slide down into inhuman violence. In today's world that is significant for the presentation of the gospel.²

The new wars in Africa and the traumatic experiences inseparable from them are therefore, as 'signs of our times', highly relevant for theology, and of great significance for the way its message is formulated.

Psychology from the Perspective of the Oppressed

From the end of the 1960s onwards, Latin American liberation theology developed what was probably the most consistent implementation of Vatican II's theology up to that point, from reflecting on its own signs of the times. It took the fundamental experience of poverty and oppression in Latin America as the starting-point of its theological method. In El Salvador the Jesuit Ignacio Martín-Baró developed a

¹ See Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, 'The Aftermath of Victimization: Rebuilding Shattered Assumptions', in *Trauma and Its Wake*, volume 1, *The Study and Treatment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*, edited by Charles R. Figley (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985), 15–35.

² Hans-Joachim Sander, 'Die Zeichen der Zeit erkennen und Gott benennen. Der semiotische Charakter von Theologie', *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 182 (2002), 27–40, here 38.

'liberation *psychology*' inspired by the basic intentions of liberation theology. Martín-Baró was a theologian, psychologist and professor of social psychology at the University of Central America in San Salvador. He was also one of the six Jesuits who, together with two women, were brutally murdered on 16 November 1989 by the army of the Salvadorean regime.³



Ignacio Martín-Baró

Martín-Baró criticized a psychology that put itself uncritically at the service of existing power-structures under the guise of supposed scientific objectivity, and fought vehemently to escape the 'safe, sterile little academic boxes'⁴ of a decontextualised approach to psychological research. Have we ever asked ourselves seriously, Martín-Baró inquired, how psychology might look from the perspective of the oppressed? Have we ever thought of looking at the psychology of work from the perspective of the unemployed, and clinical psychology from the perspective of the marginalised? He demanded that those who practise psychology should be aware of how their own ethical decisions influence their research, instead of denying that influence and acting as if there were a point of view beyond ethical choices.

Martín-Baró explained how his new conception of psychology was inspired by the three fundamental intuitions of liberation theology. First, the *integrated understanding of liberation* in liberation theology—as both 'horizontal' liberation from socio-historical oppression and 'vertical' liberation from situations of sin—supported by faith in the

³ See *Towards a Society that Serves Its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador's Murdered Jesuits*, edited by John Hassett and Hugh Lacey (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 1991); and Ignacio Martín-Baró, *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, edited by A. Aron and S. Corne (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1996).

⁴ Ignacio Martín-Baró, 'Public Opinion Research as a De-ideologizing Instrument', in *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, 186–197, here 186.

God of life, opens up a *new horizon* for psychology. Psychology starts to define itself as a contribution to liberation from social and personal oppression. Secondly, Martín-Baró developed a new theory of knowledge in psychology from liberation theology's methodological option for the *primacy of orthopraxis over* (a certain narrow understanding of) *orthodoxy*. In liberation theology practical action comes first, and reflection on that action develops out of it; likewise a liberation psychology requires commitment to the poor and oppressed as a first step, and only then, as a result, psychological theory-building. Thirdly, the *preferential option for the poor* inspires liberation psychology and prompts it to develop a new method and orientate itself towards the reality of the poor and oppressed.

What does this mean in practice? In his concept of the university, Martín-Baró required that the poor have the right to a voice in the development of the curriculum. Further, students of psychology should

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first enter into the 'alarming reality of the majority' of people living in El Salvador,⁵ and only after this experience ask for clarifying analyses and theories. His criterion of quality for psychology in El Salvador was thereby its relevance and significance to the history of an oppressed people whose viewpoint, whose suffering and hope, should become the starting-point for a revision of all the theoretical and practical tools of psychology.⁶ Further, Martín-Baró believed that liberation psychology could support people in liberating themselves—in the language of today's development politics we would call this 'empowerment'—from unjust social structures and unjust relations between men and women.

In this the Brazilian liberation educationalist Paulo Freire's concept of 'conscientisation' plays an important part. For him education is not about recognising abstract letters and learning to read them as words, but about developing a critical understanding of oneself and one's world. According to Martín-Baró, following Freire, the poor and oppressed internalise unjust social structures, do not believe in their own potential for change, and often themselves become oppressors of

⁵ Ignacio Martín-Baró, 'La liberación como horizonte de la psicología', in *Psicología de la liberación* (Madrid: Trotta, 1998), 303–341, here 313.

⁶ See Martín-Baró, 'Public Opinion Research'.

those who are socially weaker than they are, including women. Making them aware of this, with the help of psychological techniques by which people learn to understand and overcome the mechanisms of violence and internalised oppression, means liberation. Only in this way can they become agents in their own lives and change unjust structures.

Finally, Martín-Baró formulated the central task of liberation psychology as its de-ideologizing function, that is, its exposure of academic works that serve to establish and uphold social power. As well as some religious issues and fatalistic attitudes, liberation psychology de-ideologizes the relationship between the sexes and the social myths of manliness and womanliness. Martín-Baró called the family a 'safe haven' for women *and* at the same time a 'prison', exposing the myth of 'the eternal feminine' as existential slavery and calling for a plurality of choices for women. Women should be able to choose their own way of life without having to justify themselves in terms of socially reproduced stereotypes if they do not go the traditional way of marriage and family. As a priest, Martín-Baró was completely consistent in his institutional critique: the Church also had to de-ideologize its image of the sexes based on ideas of 'natural law' and stop sanctioning the oppression of women as a God-given order in its pastoral policy.⁷

Martín-Baró formulated his demand that psychology develop a new practice centred on the poor in terms of his own discipline, social psychology. Nevertheless, what he says translates into a methodology for working with trauma that differs fundamentally from objectifying, ahistorical and uncritical forms of therapeutic practice. Martín-Baró was careful not to define people as psychologically 'ill', with the help of a psycho-diagnostic category called 'trauma', when political and social 'traumatogenic' structures were responsible. He also recommended judging therapeutic methods on their effectiveness in breaking with the prevailing culture of social relations and putting healthier and more humane relationship-patterns in their place. Trauma therapy must always be *psychosocial* work because, on the one hand, traumatic

⁷ See, for example, Ignacio Martín-Baró, 'La imagen de la mujer en El Salvador', *ECA [Estudios centroamericanos]*, 35 (1980), 557–568; 'La ideología familiar en El Salvador', *ECA*, 41 (1986), 291–304; and 'La familia, puerta y cárcel para la mujer salvadoreña', *Revista de psicología de El Salvador*, 9 (1990), 265–277.



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Refugee at the Pabbo camp, Gulu, Uganda

wounds are of social origin and, on the other, these same wounds affect not only the individual, but also his or her relationships.⁸

His research always took as its starting-point the most burning psychological reality of the Salvadorean people, and was highly sensitive to power and critical of it. A reviewer once movingly described Martín-Baró as psychology's first, and so far only, martyr: his work cost him his life.

Working with Trauma in Uganda

Dialogue with Salvadorean liberation psychology has enabled me to achieve a deeper understanding of the reality of trauma in my own work with African colleagues, men and women, in a Catholic formation-centre in Uganda. A bitter twenty-year civil war raged in northern Uganda until recently, led by a rebel group called the 'Lord's Resistance Army', whose repertoire of horrors included the systematic abduction of children and young people who were trained to kill and

⁸ See, above all, Ignacio Martín-Baró, 'War and Mental Health', in *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, 108–121, and 'Political Violence and War as Causes of Psychosocial Trauma in El Salvador', *International Journal of Mental Health*, 18 (1990), 3–20.

forced to attack their own villages. The girls were also abused as sex-slaves.

Along with such extreme traumatizing experiences the chronic conflict also led to massive destructiveness in the daily life of the civilian population, and to a 'militarisation' of family relationships, especially in the form of rampant domestic violence. The sociogram, or sociological map, of this war depicts a population surviving for many years in social and psychological destitution in refugee camps. At the high point of the violence up to 80 per cent of the population lived in camps. In this situation it was the men, who are often forgotten in classic definitions of 'vulnerability', who suffered—not them only, but them also and in a particular way. Women and children are more often seen as in special need of protection—as undoubtedly they are—but the psychosocial vulnerability of men is more subtle and ambivalent.

Men in northern Uganda can no longer fulfil the classic conditions for what hegemonic cultural discourse on manliness calls being 'a real man'—as has happened with many of the other so-called modern wars, in which the line separating civilians and combatants has been wiped out. They cannot protect their wives from rape by the rebels, or their daughters from prostitution with soldiers. They are without means, and dependent on the support of international charitable organizations and the supposed protection of the national army. In the eyes of their own culture northern Ugandan men are 'weaklings'—and they are not infrequently seen as such by their wives and children. Their experience of powerlessness at many levels leads to a collapse of personal dignity, which can make the men violent against their families and against themselves. A study of suicide cases in the refugee camps shows, for example, that 72 per cent of suicides or attempted suicides were men with large families or many dependent family members.⁹

In such a context, what does the trauma work inspired by liberation psychology look like? We trained people from northern Uganda, in war zones and in refugee camps, who had important positions of trust and natural authority in their villages. The simple techniques of psychosocial trauma work involve more than the transmission of cognitive knowledge, and use pictures and stories,

⁹ Unpublished report on suicidal tendencies in refugee camps in Northern Uganda, 2007, commissioned by Caritas Gulu.

which barely literate people understand better. We described these techniques as ‘psychosocial literacy’: they were about learning to ‘read and write’ existential experiences of violence, learning to understand psychological wounds, especially when they involved particularly shameful experiences such as the sexual violence that is endemic in the region. In many African cultures, the painful, suddenly surfacing, memories known as ‘flashbacks’ that accompany traumatic violence are often interpreted as signs of witchcraft. Traumatized people may be considered bewitched or mad and excluded from the village community out of fear and ignorance. Here psychosocial work means breaking the silence over cultural taboos so that those excluded can have access to their communities again.

We worked on images of femininity and masculinity in group sessions with men and women, and searched for new models of relationship between the sexes. A particular challenge to conventional psychosocial support was the need for new images of ‘real men’, through which men could experience themselves as competent, protective and powerful within the limitations of the camps without becoming violent. This is not part of the mainstream of interventions by aid organizations, which concentrate chiefly on women and children. In this respect, trauma work inspired by liberation psychology can also mean de-ideologizing the dominant discourse about aid in the West. This has been substantially based on the notion of the ‘victim’, who has to be ‘innocent’ and ‘helpless’ in order to qualify for aid. Men in the refugee camps are far from being ‘innocent victims’ in this sense, because they have also become aggressors against their own families. But directing aid exclusively towards women and children creates more powerlessness, eventually intensifying destructiveness within families and cutting off all those involved from their most important resource for stability in such a persistently destructive situation—support from a steady, understanding social environment.

Our work inspired by liberation psychology also involved an analysis of people’s needs, for which our researchers were not international experts but people with a simple education from village communities, who had good access to the target-group, culturally and socially. The guiding principles were that everyone involved in the process should participate, researchers and subjects alike, and that specialist psychological knowledge should be democratized—shared



Sr Margaret Aceng, founder of the Caritas Counselling Centre, Gulu, Uganda

with people who could benefit from it in themselves and in their relationships. Our experiences with this participative method of research often brought astonishingly illuminating insights: the amateur researchers appreciated the contact with their opposite numbers, and those who were questioned had the sense of being valued for their 'specialist knowledge' about their problems. They were not simply wounded survivors of violence; they were taken seriously as competent individuals, and were providing an important resource for their communities.

We trained church personnel—especially catechists and women religious—who had repeatedly reached the limits of what they could achieve in their pastoral work, given the chronic traumatization of the population, because they had no tools for trauma psychology. The results were ambivalent. On the one hand, those who had been trained were much in demand, because their pastoral work was relevant to people's lives and because they had learnt to listen with empathy instead of giving the faithful catechetical instruction unrelated to their experience. But, on the other hand, there were also serious anxieties

and objections, for example from some priests who were concerned at the emancipatory potential of this work. The questions of power raised by political welfare work are seldom welcome in the African Catholic Church.

Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Context

What lessons are to be learnt from this apparently chance meeting between an extraordinarily original Latin American theory and the realities of East Africa? The first is simply that such meetings are useful, and encourage the development of new approaches to one's own reality. This is not a matter of obliterating regional and historical differences between the two contexts—quite the opposite. The methodology of liberation theology and psychology consists first of all in contextualising one's counterparts in another culture. Therefore, from its basic principles, liberation psychology has the task of forming criteria, and can judge and sharpen interventions in any context with reference to these criteria and to the fundamental option 'for the oppressed' on which they are based, which must constantly be redefined.

The second lesson is that from the interdisciplinary 'one-way street' between liberation theology and psychology (as Ignacio Martín-Baró saw it), where theology inspired psychology, a multi-lane motorway in both directions has developed through reflection on our practice in East Africa. Thus liberation psychology can also enrich liberation theology, which many people believe has already exhausted itself through methodological weaknesses and because of a historical paradigm-shift. Liberation psychology can support liberation theology in substantiating its option for the poor—which is as relevant as ever; in identifying the psychosocially effective mechanisms of oppression in more nuanced ways; and creating approaches for 'horizontal', social liberation.

Thirdly, liberation psychology offers a valuable corrective to pastoral methods which are insensitive to trauma in dealing with the wounds of violence, and whose real motivation is not usually the empowerment of the oppressed, especially when the oppressed are women.

The 'Added Value' of Liberation Psychology in Trauma Work

Can it be assumed that in trauma work liberation psychology can 'do more' than psychology alone? Is there something like an 'added value' in a concept of psychology derived from liberation theology that is lacking in current discourse about trauma? These questions can be answered in two ways. From one perspective, liberation psychology questions every intervention critically about its underlying commitment and demands political engagement from those intervening on behalf of the oppressed. It is immediately obvious that trauma work is always partisan, because it must always define the 'victim' and the 'oppressor'. It takes place, also, in a social environment that either sanctions these categories or prohibits them politically.

From my own experience in countries that have emerged from conflict I know that the stories of traumatized people contain historical pain, and not all such stories are politically acceptable to the current regime. In situations of social instability, trauma work inspired by liberation psychology must consciously face its political responsibility and renounce the myth of an impartiality that would rather not be mixed up in 'politics'. Every intervention is political in its effects, even if it calls itself apolitical in intention. It is a matter of consciously making an ethically justified choice. Unfortunately international interventions concerned with trauma therapy often lack this consciousness of making a choice.

I see a further 'added value' in a psychology inspired by liberation theology, at the very point where empowerment and therapeutic work reach their limits. There are places where the field of trauma touches on theology as well as psychology. It has been recognised, for example, that spirituality offers one of the most important resources in the treatment of traumatized people, and it is used in trauma psychology everywhere. Much as this is to be welcomed, it is necessary to be aware of the danger that its use in therapy may instrumentalise spirituality, deforming its essential, transcendental quality so that it becomes simply a vehicle for 'good' feelings or 'healing' insights. If there is to be a real encounter, beyond using spirituality as a therapeutic tool, it is necessary to reflect on the question of what spirituality must look like if it is to meet the requirements of both theological reasoning *and* the necessary respect for the unutterable.

Just as psychology ought not to treat spirituality as a fitness-exercise, so theology, faced with the abysses that open up for humanity, should not be misused as a kind of intellectual air-bag against powerlessness. It should not withdraw from controversial issues by using the cross and the good news of the resurrection as its trump-card, through which finally, if not in this life then in the next, 'everything will be all right'. The Ghanaian feminist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye resists what is an equally abusive use of the symbol of the cross, as a kind of 'shamelessly patriarchal' theological aid to the subjection of women, inducing them to remain passive in violent relationships. The true reality of the cross, according to Oduyoye, is already too serious for these women.¹⁰

So how might a critically aware spirituality look in the context of liberation psychology? This question was brought urgently to my attention at a meeting in Rwanda in March 2004, in the course of my research. I talked there with a very experienced therapist from a

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Women at a domestic violence workshop in Kigali, Rwanda

¹⁰ See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'Alive to What God Is Doing', *Ecumenical Review*, 41 (1989), 194–200, here 199.

Rwandan organization, called Jeanne. She told me the story of a sixteen-year-old client whom I shall call Rose. Rose was six when soldiers came to her house and slaughtered her parents and her siblings in front of her. Finally they grabbed Rose, tore the clothes off her body, and raped her until she lost consciousness because of the pain. She was found, taken to hospital, and nearly died from loss of blood and internal injuries. When she recovered consciousness, she never spoke again about what had happened to her. Usually she didn't speak at all and only smiled. She ate, drank and grew, but she was no longer responsive to other people: she had exiled her psyche to another world. A short time later this girl was diagnosed as HIV-positive—one consequence of the rapes. Now, ten years later, she was close to death, despite anti-retroviral drugs. The therapist Jeanne was deeply moved at the end of this story:

You know, for years I have been asking her how she is, and she always just smiles and says 'Fine', and looks straight through me. She takes the drugs and carries on. But here I am, and I can't bear it that I can't help her, that I can't get through to her, that no one can get through to her any more. Neither love nor sympathy nor anything else can get through to her.

I was profoundly affected by what she told me, because I know the pain of such helplessness, as do many of my colleagues, both men and women. We all come into contact with a kind of transcendence in this way, whether we call it that or not: we are unable to reach a deeply wounded life and cannot offer healing. This sense of helplessness can lead to a professional 'burnout' for trauma therapists, known technically as 'secondary' or 'vicarious' trauma. The source of this trauma is empathy, the key to healing in therapeutic discourse, but also the key that opens the heart and makes it vulnerable. The Jewish psychoanalyst Dori Laub says from listening to survivors of violence that it is only through empathy that their stories first come into being and are recognised in their authenticity. But this bearing witness—and here the inner political dimension of trauma therapy shows itself once more—means also having a share in the pain, the defeat and the silence of the victim.¹¹

¹¹ Dori Laub, 'An Event without a Witness', in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 79.

The Compassion of God and Humility in Trauma Therapy

In these experiences it becomes clear to aid workers themselves that trauma is the place where we stop being well-trained professional therapists and human-rights activists, with our therapeutic techniques and objective research methods. Trauma is not an occasion for therapeutic triumph, but often a place of breakdown and a constant lesson in humility.

Nevertheless, in this work we come into contact with stories of suffering from people who maintain their dignity. These stories converge from the Christian point of view—if one decides to look at them this way—with the stories in the Bible: stories of despair and hopelessness, and even, at Golgotha, of the remoteness of God. The testimony of the Bible is this: God is with God's people on their journey, hears their cries and, in Jesus Christ, sides with those who are powerless. This gives to the work of trauma therapy, with all the failures that we often experience in it, a dignity beyond diagnostics and therapeutics. It has a share in God's compassion for the powerless.

A critical spirituality within liberation psychology is not distant or unfeeling. It includes, rather, passionate and sympathetic mourning together with the survivors of violence. It does not seek to explain away the theological abysses; paradoxically, it experiences them more acutely. To believe in a God 'who so gloriously rules over all' does not make conversation with Rose from Uganda easier. God always remains withdrawn from us and wholly Other, especially when we encounter the wounds of suffering; God remains near *and* absent at the same time. But it is precisely when we consciously recognise the fragmentary nature of hope in this experience that the longing grows for a world in which—as the Marxist philosopher Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) expressed it—the murderer does not always triumph over his innocent victim.¹² Without this fragile hope, trauma work seems to me scarcely possible, if burnout and cynicism against the 'evil world' are not to gain the upper hand.

So a spirituality of liberation psychology—however practitioners may define it in their work and bring it to life—combines a consciousness of political responsibility with a potential for therapeutic

¹² M. Horkheimer, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen. Ein Interview mit Kommentar von Helmut Gammior* (Hamburg: Furche, 1970), 61 following.

humility and ‘vicarious’ hope, qualities which are at the moment sadly lacking in much international trauma work. It would certainly help to combat the delusion that therapy can always offer solutions and, paradoxically, at the same time make it clear that we as practitioners carry a much greater responsibility than our therapeutic settings make us believe. It would give human suffering more genuine space.

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