

*Toward Psychologies of Liberation*  
Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman  
New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008

## Introduction

This book re-thinks the goals and practices of psychology in an age of disruptive globalization. At the beginning of this new millennium, after hundreds of years of colonialism and neocolonialism, we cannot escape the disturbing fact that we live in a world where more than a billion people lack sufficient shelter, food, and clean water; where lakes, rivers, and top soils are dying; where cultures clash and war, genocide, and acts of terrorism seem ordinary. Transnational corporations with vast reach and power control land, media, economies, and elections. Their policies are decided away from public view, in national and international arenas where the super-rich and super-armed preside. Economic globalization undermines much that is local and personal, affecting possibilities for housing, jobs, cultural expression, and self-governance. Such globalization has created a tidal wave of displacement, undermining families, neighborhoods, and cultures. Many who fear these changes blame newcomers and outsiders, reverting to xenophobic and nostalgic narratives, imagining a simpler and “purer” prior history.

The psychological effects of deepening divides between the rich and the poor, unprecedented migrations, and worsening environmental degradation mark this era as one requiring extraordinary critical and reconstructive approaches. As the margins of many cities in the world swell with refugees, immigrants, and the homeless, and the countryside with the hungry and the unemployed, new practices and theories are emerging for addressing psychological suffering and rebuilding communities. Practitioners of these innovative projects are sometimes trained psychologists working under the rubrics of critical, peace, community, or liberation psychologies, but just as often they are artists and cultural workers, women’s movement activists, youth and environmental justice advocates, public health professionals, liberation theologians, or community organizers. Although they aspire to improve the miserable living conditions of the most marginalized, part of their emerging vision is the need for creating solidarities and dialogues with more privileged people whose environments and psychological well-being

are also undermined by the fragmentation of community, the widening of social divides, and the often insidious self-doubt that accompanies crises of personal and cultural meaning. Sandoval (2000) argues that now “the emotional ground tone of the once centered, modernist, first world citizen-subject [is] shot through with intensities so that it resembles the emotional territory of subordinated peoples” (p. 33).

Institutional arrangements and ways of thinking that grow out of centuries of colonialism need to be questioned by those on both sides of the divides that have been created. Colonialism structured economic and social institutions through culturally constructed racist hierarchies that were presented as though given in nature. Strategies of power and control that depended on violence were developed in colonial wars abroad, and then repeated as part of the democracy practiced at home. Viewing some people as less than human allowed slavery, genocide, brutal policing, and the systematic economic deprivation of marginalized populations. The current military strategy of preemptive war has drawn on these well-rehearsed ways of thinking and acting to designate the Middle East as a site of the less than human other to be brought under American surveillance and control. The outcome of a history embedded in colonial thought has been a psychology of forgetting and denial in private and public spheres—a forgetting that has yielded a traumatic lack of witness of individual and community wounds caused by the larger social context (Shulman-Lorenz & Watkins, 2002b). The only choice is to grow numb with amnesia, or to find and engage models for critically exploring the past and creating alternative futures. All over the earth, innovative liberation psychologies are asking what kinds of psychological approaches might enhance capacities for critical thinking, collective memory, peacemaking, and the creative transformation of individuals, groups, and neighborhoods.

One of the most profound problems of the current era is that many people do not have any viable visions of what could be different in their lives or communities. This is a psychological problem sometimes referred to as fatalism, anomie, or symbolic loss: a despairing sense that social networks, valued customs, and shared memories are irretrievably weakened, lost, or forgotten. Attempts to imagine new and vibrant social arrangements with others seem hopeless. Symbolic loss (Homans, 2000) is a catastrophic decay of the fabric of meanings and rituals that link individuals in a common culture. Sometimes symbolic loss involves complete cultural disintegrations that render rituals and customs seemingly pointless, and histories forgotten. Such symbolic loss affects hearts and minds, physical health, and abilities to build community. It is a psychological issue that profoundly impacts possibilities for democratic processes. Passive, disengaged, and divided populations can be more easily manipulated and controlled. In such environments, psychologies of regeneration are needed, ways to imagine rebuilding psychological spaces where one can develop a critical analysis of one’s situation,

improvise new practices for the healing of individuals and communities, and recover or create a sense of common purpose and vision.

Imagination is a psychological phenomenon that occurs at the level of the local in individuals and communities. It gives those in isolating, asphyxiating, and exhausted social structures new possibilities. To create cultural alternatives, people have to break with taken for granted ways of thinking that prevent them psychologically from interrupting the status quo. They need to do work that “renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent in-between space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 7). Learning to create conditions for social and personal regeneration, for an awakening of hope and imagination, is one of the central psychological tasks of our era.

We have been tracking compass points or orientations in the form of ideas, practices, and projects that nurture an imagination of alternative ways of thinking and acting together that can transform participation in social, economic, and ecological change and address psychological sufferings. We call these orientations “psychologies of liberation,” imagining them as potentially a great river fed by many streams emerging from underground springs and from mountain runoffs in numerous local settings. We see liberation psychology as a river with a definite direction and longing, reaching for a distant sea.

When we perceive and think in terms of liberation psychologies, we witness a new sensibility struggling to be born in the world in varied locations. For many, there is a conviction that contemporary scripts have worn thin, and that neighbors must be more creative in the ways they live together in the world. In this book, we want to help connect the streams of current conversations we hear going on in separate locations, helping to draw them together to form a variegated field with a provisional name. There are already existing traditions with many elders and ancestors, as well as networks, but further links need to be articulated so that their coalescence can feed a sense of possibility. We need to understand the intersection of unifying themes within these traditions in order to strengthen them.

We name this coalescence “psychologies of liberation,” taking heed of Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock’s (1997) advice that the naming of a tradition is critical in order for it to thrive:

When a tradition has no name people will not have a rich shared language for articulating and reflecting on their experiences with the tradition. Poorly articulated traditions are likely to be fragile. Without a common language the tradition will not become part of a well-established, ongoing dialogue in the larger society. Institutional supports to develop and refine the tradition’s philosophy and practices will not be developed. Leaders’ efforts to pass the tradition on to the next generation will be poorly supported. Existing educational institutions will not hire faculty

who are experts in the tradition; appropriate curriculum and apprenticeships will not be developed. This situation is increasingly problematic as more and more of society's caring work is now being carried out by professionals who receive all of their professional training within the formal education system.

(pp. 293–4)

For the most part, academic psychology in the United States has not been sufficiently helpful in recognizing or supporting emerging liberation psychologies. The mainstream academic marketplace in psychology in America continues to favor cognitive behaviorism, neuroscientific approaches, and quantitative methods. These emphases position the discipline of psychology within the powerful natural sciences, a move that has characterized the dominant core of the discipline since its conception. This is a move that has been contested since that early moment as well. These dominant approaches within psychology are exported throughout the world. International graduate students studying in American departments of psychology disseminate them when returning to their home countries—with questionable consequences. It would not be difficult to find an American mental health expert in a refugee camp in the Sudan teaching Euro-American definitions of “trauma,” and then following this up with the provision of inappropriate trainings and short-term funded services to individuals that often undermine long-term community resources and connections. In general, approaches to treatment that are supported in clinical psychology programs tend to focus on individuals in isolation from their communities, and very often do not take into account local cultural differences.

Because of its positivist scientific orientation, much of mainstream psychology has emerged as a search for universals, for norms of emotional life and behavior, and for modes of treatment for individuals who deviate from these norms. This orientation decontextualizes the individuals under its scrutiny. Obscuring the impact of collective trauma on mental health has led to treatments for single individuals while leaving intact the social environments that mitigate against psychological well-being. In order to address social issues, a critical psychological approach to symptoms is called for, an approach that is careful to understand the dynamic interrelation between psychological suffering and cultural and historical context (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2005). A new picture emerges when individual thought and behavior are seen in wider context, and when psychology is placed in the service of addressing the healing of individuals within this larger frame. When conservative and heteronormative gender roles were challenged in the United States, for example, symptoms that were once seen as deviant were reinterpreted as signs of protest against restrictive social roles. In other arenas, when massive immigration, economic development, state terror, or

war interrupt previously stable customs, those who hold on to older norms may come to be seen as rigid, unrelated, and repetitive, while those who evolve outside of them might be interpreted as resilient and resourceful.

Rather than searching for stereotypical norms, liberation psychologies place stress on identifying, supporting, and nurturing the psychological attempts of individuals and groups alike to re-author their own sense of identity. This requires a critical analysis of oppressive power relations, including those within psychology itself. Psychologies of liberation gather together resources to help people understand possibilities for multiple layers of interpretation through which the world that has been imposed on them can be understood and reorganized. With embodied practices, people are able to evolve ways to resymbolize their worlds through creative conversation and activity in the arts. They are able to commit to transformative efforts through social and political action. Liberation psychologies develop the research and practices that lead to understanding and supporting such directions.

Contrary to a universalizing approach, we have set about learning practices of psychological liberation that are like wellsprings erupting out of the ground in many places throughout the world, each marked by its own culture and location. We recognize these practices when they focus on the well-being and self-organization of people and their communities, when they promote critical reflection and transformation in local arenas, and when their goal is not the imposition of a prescribed yardstick of development but an opening toward greater freedom in imaging the goals of life. This opening is based on the interrelatedness of individuals, communities, cultures, histories, and environments. For many of the projects we have studied, the recollection of a repressed or denied history is a key element in reclaiming vitality. Most of these projects involve learning the skills of dialogue and reconciliation across different points of view in order to build new solidarities. Such work tends to proceed slowly over months or years as people learn to let go of fixed ideas and to allow new symbols, emotions, and relationships to enter their lives. Often it begins in small groups that develop ways of speaking about and symbolizing elements of the local environment that slowly seep out into the larger culture and begin to affect community discourses.

Our focus on psychologies of liberation has emerged from prolonged wrestling with psychotherapeutic and research paradigms, critiquing mainstream approaches to psychology, and researching liberatory psychological practices in different parts of the world. We are both trained in depth psychology, that is, the psychologies of the unconscious set out by Freud, Jung, Klein, Horney, Hillman, Lacan, Kristeva, and others, and we draw from these approaches in our understandings of possibilities for individual transformation. Our working understandings have led us to place psychodynamic clinical theories and individual treatment within historical and cultural context. We have increasingly understood the needed healing potentials of

family, small group, and community-based dialogical approaches to psychological well-being. We have steadily moved toward participatory research and the importance of the arts for both individual and community expression and visioning.

We have collaborated in developing a graduate program in psychology that respects the interdependence of psyche, family, social and economic arrangements, culture, and environment. Students spend two years planning and carrying out experimental community and ecological fieldwork and research while studying the compass points of liberation psychology (Community/Ecological Fieldwork and Research, n.d.). Our students convene groups or apprentice themselves to pre-existing settings such as hospices, schools, prisons, juvenile halls, theaters, centers for community arts, environmental projects, and centers for creative aging. They learn and practice the dialogical and collaborative approaches to group and community restorative work that we will be presenting in this book: liberation arts, council, dialogue, appreciative inquiry, participatory research, imaginal work, Theater of the Oppressed, and public conversation. Learning as much from failures as from successes, we use a participatory research model through which we collaboratively study the dark sides of our hopes, the limitations of our vision, and the impasses in truly listening. Each year we have reorganized the curriculum and rewritten research guidelines based on what we have experienced. This book presents a summation of this process of collaborative learning.

Each of us has arrived at this book slowly over decades, coming from differing directions. For one of us, Mary Watkins, this work has involved a deconstruction of and divestiture from much of her formal training in psychotherapy and psychological research. Her early education as a Quaker attuned her to issues of social justice and to respectful, nonhierarchical, collaborative relational practices that honor the sacred in each person. Coming to understand the broad historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the psychological theories and practices in which she was schooled allowed her to take a critical distance from psychiatric diagnosis, individualistic understandings of human suffering, normative ideas of family and child development, and hierarchical and disempowering clinical and research relations. Her earlier work was rooted in depth psychology's emphasis on the vital role of imagination in interrupting internalized norms and in suggesting alternative ways of being. Discovering the community and cultural work of Freire and Martín-Baró, and the feminist developmental work of Gilligan and Belenky provided paths to understanding psychological suffering in historical and cultural context. For her, psychological healing has become indelibly linked with community and ecological restoration. The abiding connecting thread between these domains is the development of dialogical relations.

Helene Shulman was educated in a conservative Jewish community deeply affected by the Holocaust and profoundly aware of the wounds and dangers of social exclusion. She began to develop new ideas about community dialogue and transformation as a graduate student studying philosophy and phenomenology while participating simultaneously in the Civil Rights Movement in Louisiana. In the 1970s and 1980s, she enjoyed an inspiring period of work in community building, solidarity efforts, and cultural arts in collaboration with Latin American and Native American organizations in California and Latin America. Eventually, hard lessons in the difficulties of effecting social change that were being learned by political movements all over the Americas drove her to study depth psychology formally as well as critically, searching for new ways to understand psychological and cultural factors in individual and social transformation.

Our authorship is fully shared. Each of us wrote a draft of half of the chapters. A process of multiple revisions allowed us to interlace our words and thoughts, a process we have enjoyed for ten years of writing and teaching together. For both of us, a re-thinking of our academic disciplines has required years of sifting through psychological and cultural work and imagining both anew. In our efforts to re-orient depth psychological theory and practice toward liberatory ends, we hold a common vision of what it might be like if students of psychology and cultural workers could collaborate at the convergence of these several paths—a place where what is needed from psychology has been winnowed out and wed to creative efforts of individual and community regeneration.

During the decade of our work together, culture wars have been raging in the academic world. Debates within the field of psychology have arisen over whose point of view and whose culture will be represented and voiced within the curriculum. We found it necessary to re-orient psychological theory so that universalism, Eurocentrism, sexism, and racism can be challenged and disrupted in order to realign psychology's work in this century with pressing needs for individual, community, ecological, and cultural liberation. We have experienced directly the forces of resistance to such goals.

Thus this book is not a naïve offering; neither is it meek in its ambitions. We are aware of the price that is paid for challenging paradigms and for transgressing disciplinary boundaries. As a result, we have been heartened by, and devoted to, work happening throughout the world that understands interdependence, and that turns its efforts toward nourishing needed critical insight, and toward developing capacities for dialogue, imagination, and creative action. Is it possible for more of psychology to align itself with and support these efforts to contribute to a peaceful and just society? Just how would it need to re-orient? How might those working psychologically with individuals and those working with groups and communities explore where the other's work is crucial to their own, creating improvisations of healing

at multiple sites in addition to and beyond psychotherapy on the one hand and social action groups on the other? This is the task to which we turn, encouraging sharing of the springs of community regeneration and individual restoration that have surfaced. Our hope is to contribute to their sustenance and vitality.

\* \* \* \*

This book is organized into four parts: Part I: Compass Points; Part II: Psychic Wounds of Colonialism and Globalization; Part III: Springs for Creative Restoration; and Part IV: Participatory Practices of Liberation Psychologies. They address the following unfolding questions. Part I: What are the goals of liberation psychologies? What does one need to “unthink” in mainstream psychology and developmental theory in order to re-orient toward liberatory work? Part II: What are the psychological frameworks that have allowed people to adapt to and identify with dysfunctional cultural arrangements? How does social location affect experience and from what do people suffer psychologically as a result—as bystanders, perpetrators, victims, and witnesses? Part III: How are people able to change their points of view? How does one learn to host the liminal spaces that are created through rupture and trauma? How can one nurture capacities for dialogue that will assist in the restoration of communities, cultures, environments, and individuals? Part IV: Finally, in communities, and between communities, in research and in healing work, what are the participatory practices one can create that flow from new understandings of social pathologies?

The idea of liberation psychology evolved in Latin America as a critique of the tendency of mainstream psychologies to shore up the status quo. Like liberation theology, it asked “Whom does this work serve?” Deeply indebted to Latin American models for psychologies of liberation (Hollander, 1997; Martín-Baró, 1994; Montero, 1996), we have also sought out kindred models in Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands, Europe, and the United States. We speak of “liberation psychologies” in the plural because our hope is that the work will be seen as dynamic, ongoing, never to be finally achieved, and never capable of being taught from above. To work in the pluralism of liberation psychologies is to state our sense that we must always be involved in the seeing through of psychological theory, putting it into conversation with other disciplines, working interculturally, learning from resonant practices, and deepening our reflections on where we are standing and placing our advocacies. In their diverse locations and cultures of origin, the streams of thought we consider to be thematically linked are called by many different names. They need not share a common name, but we hope that they can more often come together in dialogue that contributes to their long-term sustenance and catalytic vitality.