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TYPE: Article CC:CCG

JOURNAL TITLE: International review of psychiatry

USER JOURNAL TITLE: International Review of Psychiatry

ARTICLE TITLE: Decoloniality and community-psychology practice in puerto rico: Autonomous organising (autogestión) and self-determination.

ARTICLE AUTHOR: Ortiz Torres, Blanca,

VOLUME:

ISSUE:

MONTH: 07

YEAR: 2020

PAGES:

ISSN: 0954-0261

OCLC #:

Processed by RapidX: 3/3/2021 3:47:25 PM

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To cite this article: Blanca Ortiz Torres (2020) Decoloniality and community-psychology practice in Puerto Rico: autonomous organising (*autogestión*) and self-determination, International Review of Psychiatry, 32:4, 359-364, DOI: [10.1080/09540261.2020.1761776](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2020.1761776)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2020.1761776>



Published online: 08 Jul 2020.



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ORIGINAL RESEARCH



Decoloniality and community-psychology practice in Puerto Rico: autonomous organising (*autogestión*) and self-determination

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ABSTRACT

Psychology, as a diverse social practice, must take a stance regarding the colonial world-system that legitimises the hegemonic production of knowledge. Decolonising community psychology requires the transformation of its practices to face cultural and institutional systems that reproduce inequality in colonial contexts as well as the validating of indigenous knowledge. Reflecting on an intervention in response to the devastation of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, this paper highlights the importance of a community psychological practice that promotes the search for self-determination and autonomous organising or *autogestión*. Following the notion that community psychologists should be social change agents whose professional activity constitutes a political act, our proposal is to stress decoloniality as a pedagogical practice, incorporating its principles to everyday interactions with diverse people, groups, organisations and communities. Self-determination refers to the ability for people, groups, neighbourhoods and communities to recognise the demands of their contexts and respond in ways that potentiate control over their own lives simultaneously with the search and action for collective well-being. Autonomous organising aims at individual and collective empowerment, to demand from official institutions and agents what their rights are, when they need it, by organising contestant responses to the systematic injustices and the abandonment of colonial instances.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 November 2019
Accepted 23 April 2020

KEYWORDS

Community psychology;
decoloniality; self-
determination; autonomous
organising; hurricane maria

To the extent that the disciplinary boundaries in community psychology and other social sciences are blurred and we increasingly learn from cultural and geopolitical studies, the need for the decolonisation of the production of knowledge as legitimised in science and hegemonic knowledge(s) is also more evident (Mignolo, 2001). Some observe these developments with scepticism because, they argue, ‘science’ and its episteme are not susceptible to the influence and consequences of colonial processes, but rather to aspirations of universality. Despite this relative scepticism, many community psychologists have been stressing the need for decolonisation in the discipline (Reyes & Sonn, 2011; Rozas, 2018; Serrano García, 2019). As this conversation evolves, some fundamental questions are emerging: Which phenomena should community psychology study? From what perspectives do we define them? What knowledge do we legitimise? and, How does our work embody or not decolonial aspirations and postures?

In Latin America, these processes have been gradually leading into a growing recognition and appreciation of the knowledge produced by indigenous

people; however, the attempts of decolonising community psychology are not limited to these efforts. Decolonising community psychology is also about the promotion of self-determination and autonomous organising or *autogestión* wherever alternatives to hegemonic ways of knowing and explaining psychosocial processes are needed.

The epistemologies generated from colonised spaces such as Latin America and the Caribbean have been excluded from the dominant Eurocentric and US discourse of Community Psychology. This is what the decolonial Social Sciences of the South have called ‘the geopolitics of knowledge.’ (Mignolo, 2016). Rozas (2018) distinguishes between two main modalities of colonisation: ‘one of them is physical, territorial appropriation [...] and a second type of colonization, called coloniality, which aims to install and control thinking’ (p. 56). Puerto Rico has been a colony for more than five hundred years; first a colony of Spain and, after the 1898 invasion, a colony of the United States. Thus, in Puerto Rico we live and struggle with both modalities of colonisation.

The colonial and colonising relationship with the metropolis (United States), as well as our struggle for decolonisation, is always present and central in all dimensions of our lives, including the production of knowledge, education, and of course, our praxis as professionals of all disciplines (Mignolo, 2001). The present work represents another effort of what Walsh (2013) called ‘to think and live decolonially despite the colonial power’ (p. 25), speaking not from ‘the center of the empire, but from the core of resistance to the empire’ (Mignolo, 2001).

Decolonising psychological practice

We live and embody coloniality in our ways of producing and disseminating knowledge as well as in engaging in our praxis. As an academic and coinciding with Walsh and Maldonado Torres (2013), my exchanges with our students stress our roles as potential social change agents, which certainly implies a personal process of transformation and a political stance (Ortiz Torres, 2015). In this sense, pedagogy is not only content, but also a process that is not limited to the classroom; it is part of daily interactions with students, groups, organisations and communities.

Central to this process is the importance of realising that our work constitutes a political act, which must question and challenge the status quo. Moreover, our praxis must ‘destabilize the dominant order to open considerations and possibilities’ (Walsh, 2013:20). These are crucial considerations particularly when you live in a colony and aspire to a decolonial community psychology, with a commitment to make the political personal and to engage in humanising practices (Maldonado Torres, 2012). Let us now discuss potential ways in which the promotion of *autogestión* and self-determination might, in turn, contribute to advance decolonisation as well as decoloniality, while promoting collective and individual well-being and mental health.

A socio-natural catastrophe called ‘María’

On September 20, 2017 a category-5 hurricane named ‘María’ hit the Island of Puerto Rico, leaving behind the highest number of casualties caused by such a phenomenon. Approximately 3,000 deaths have been directly or indirectly attributed to the hurricane (Kishore et al., 2018). In what has been labelled as the ‘longest blackout in US history’ (Irfan, 2018), in the aftermath of María most of the island had no electrical power for periods ranging between two and

eight months, and 250,000 houses were totally or partially destroyed (Molinari, 2019). An estimated 160,000 people left the archipelago to relocate in the United States (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, 2018) and total damages have been estimated in 90 million dollars (Brusi & Godreau, 2019)

After the landfall of Hurricane María on Puerto Rico, the governmental response both from the local authorities and from the metropolis was slow and ineffective, impeding the recovery process. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) took too long to respond to millions of requests for assistance and denied or not responded to 79% of appeal claims (Molinari, 2019). FEMA demonstrated its poor preparation and lack of sensitivity to handle the situation in Puerto Rico. Noboa Ortega (2019) describes this vividly:

[S]everal residents have been discriminated against because they are poor, Black, and do not speak English. Many residents commented that FEMA inspectors spoke little or no Spanish. Others reported that they were mistreated by the inspectors: they were told to be silent, the inspectors joked about the situation, and they received FEMA correspondence in English, even though residents had requested them in Spanish (p. 278).

Given the absence of governmental leadership in responding to an extreme emergency situation, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), volunteers, and community residents became the first line of response, due to their determination, presence, and closeness to people and communities. Some of the responses generated by informal and formal groups and organisations across the archipelago included the occupation of schools (closed and abandoned by the local government as part of a harsh policy of austerity implemented by the Fiscal Oversight Board)¹, organisation of community social kitchens (Roberto, 2019), collection and distribution centres, and the establishment and operations of ambulatory makeshift health clinics.

A post-María community intervention

One lesson I have learned after more than three decades working as a community psychologist, is the importance of conceptualising and implementing interventions as humanising and decolonial acts. This aspiration is guided by core principles of community psychology such as the promotion of self-determination, empowerment, and the abandonment of the expert role in our interactions with participants in research and action projects. What follows is an

account of and a reflection about a community intervention developed and carried out in the context of María's aftermath. Although our work was not originally conceived as an action-research project, we believe it is important to consider and discuss lessons learned in this process, which might guide future interventions in similar contexts.

For the first month after the emergency, I was part of an initiative organised by the Puerto Rican College of Physicians and Surgeons in shelters and severely affected communities. Ten groups were initially organised composed by physicians of several specialties (e.g. paediatricians, family MDs, endocrinologists), nurses, and at least one behavioural health professional, which could include psychologists, counsellors or social workers. In one of the communities, I was approached by a community leader who expressed the need for long-term interventions to provide psychosocial support to residents, particularly to children. A week after that initial conversation, and in coordination with the community leader, a group of community psychology graduate students and myself initiated an eight-month collaboration with the community of Valle Hill in the municipality of Canóvanas (in the northeastern region of Puerto Rico).

Valle Hill was established approximately in 1991, as a 'squatter' community; many of its houses were built on a wetland owned by the Land Authority of Puerto Rico (Lozada, personal communication, October 2017). The majority of the 3,500 residents are documented and undocumented immigrants from the Dominican Republic, as well as Puerto Ricans. Residents of the Valle Hill community do not possess property titles (Noboa, 2019). Residents lack essential services such as electricity and drinking water (most have access to both resources illegally). The hurricane destroyed approximately 41% of the houses in the sector and flooded many of them (Noboa, 2019).

During the first weeks our group worked with one of the community leaders in collecting, searching and distributing supplies and materials. We also initiated a familiarisation process as we interacted with members of the Neighbourhood Board and the community to communicate that our future work with them will respond to their stated needs and goals. The Neighbourhood Board and those residents who attended initial meetings identified community needs and established their priorities to move on to the development of a work plan that guided the activities to be carried out. We were invited to collaborate in the process and to participate in all meetings and

sessions, while we continued the familiarisation promoting a sense of hope and connection among them. Our role was to help ignite empowering and self-determination processes. We all agreed that the overall goal was to contribute to get the community to a better place than they were before María, in terms of autonomy and sustainability.

Three main activities were designed and conducted with our support as part of the work plan that emerged from our meetings and conversations: sport clinics, craft workshops, and community mobilisation to complete the community aqueduct that was paralysed two years prior to the hurricane. The craft workshops evolved as an intergenerational space for conversation and exchange in a community that was fragmented and disconnected after the hurricane. These activities were also venues to promote empowerment, support autonomous organising processes aimed at the completion of the aqueduct, and the recognition of residents as political subjects with transformative capacities. During this period, we worked in Valle Hill three days a week, including Sundays. We frequently engaged in discussions with residents regarding the political nature of the processes they lived, particularly when some politicians visited the community for their own personal benefit.

Children between the ages of eight to 12 participated in the volleyball clinics conducted by our students. In these game sessions, we observed gendered violence, including physical and verbal aggressions. In those situations, we would discuss their behaviours and established agreements between participating children and facilitators, stressing the need of respectful and team-oriented behaviours. Discussions and agreements held during and after the games, generated more participation, attention, and interactions among participants, particularly about issues regarding gender equality and behaviours that would demonstrate respect and appreciation for each other.

As part of a drawing workshop we explored children's experiences with regard to their lack of access to drinking water services in their homes and community. Some of the drawings were used in promotional posters for a Cinema Forum aimed at promoting discussion about the current situation of the aqueduct project. From the discussions that evolved at the Cinema Forum, neighbours agreed upon the pressing need for drinking water services and decided to organise (in our company) various actions to demand the continuation and completion of the project. A series of community meetings were held, with legislators,

journalists and one with the mayor of the town, to express their claims and demands.

Our intervention in Valle Hill, a community composed mostly of immigrants, Black Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, female heads of household, people living in poverty (due to the cycle that promotes discrimination and unfair treatment), devastated by a socio-natural catastrophe, was guided by our values as community psychology (e.g. social justice, access to resources, cultural diversity and human rights in all their diversity), and mostly by a decolonial aspiration to promote self-determination.

We ended our collaboration with Valle Hill after eight months of intense work and exchange, as the three main objectives of the work plan were accomplished: children and adolescents, as well as their parents, were engaging in frequent social interactions; residents had a plan to follow up on the aqueduct project; and they had more resources and services at the community. An unexpected outcome was the election and organisation of a second Neighbourhood Board, as a group of residents felt the existing Board did not represent them. This event provoked tension and raised concerns among some and hope among others. Eight months after María, many residents connected their homes to 'alternative sources' of water and were rebuilding their houses. Some had initiated makeshift small businesses selling food, beverages and sweets in the community, and a brigade of residents were repairing the electrical system in many sectors of Valle Hill.

Residents' initiatives did not have the approval or support of the government, which has been absent at the city, country and metropolis levels. These initiatives are not just autonomous organising, they are also a contesting response to the abandonment of all colonial instances. Our interactions with residents underscored the importance of recognising their potential as a community to organise and promote changes at various levels. Oppressed people have proved to be versatile and creative in defining strategies and tactics to resist coloniality and inequality, in their particular contexts, history, and power relationships with colonial and/or hegemonic forces.

Closing activities included a farewell party in which children and adolescents wore a shirt with a logo of their community, as they felt they were now a team. Residents that had worked in some or all the phases of the process expressed their commitment to continue their struggle for the construction of the aqueduct. A group of colleagues of diverse backgrounds and specialties are currently working in Valle Hill

having established a legal and psychological clinic (Noboa, 2019), which provides support to participants in their claims to FEMA and orientation regarding property titles. The clinic also provides professional psychological help to individual residents as well as families.

Self-determination and *autogestión*: contesting the notion of resilience

Community psychologists have theorised and documented the notion that communities are not ideal or idyllic places (Krause, 2001; Lara, 2007). Lara (2007) goes further to say that many communities are in a state of organic chaos that may lead to generation or regeneration. In Valle Hill, after María it was not only the infrastructure that was devastated, but also the social fabric, networks and social interactions which were often characterised by conflict, individualism, and asymmetric power relations.

These relationships unfold within the community boards, between the boards, and between the boards and the residents. Most of the time, the boards reproduce the dynamics exercised by almost all the people and groups that hold leadership positions, that is, centralisation of decision-making processes, alliances with political parties to access privileges and benefits, exclusion, among many others. In a display of the coloniality of power, Neighbourhood Boards and the leadership of the political party at the municipal level, were constantly attempting to co-opt community mobilisation efforts initiated and developed by the residents. This is a (historical) pattern, that calls for the alteration of traditional decision-making structures and the construction of alternate spaces.

Many have labelled this kind of processes and responses as resilience. I disagree. As Aquino has asserted:

On the one hand, there seems to be awareness that many of their problems stem from inequalities that are social in nature but, on the other, concepts like 'resilience' are used to reflect blame back unto them for their shortcomings. As a quality, resilience is positive. It is toughness, the ability to recover quickly from difficulties. But, when weaponized, 'resiliency' becomes an incapacitating rhetorical device... Strength can only get you so far (Aquino, 2017).

Although there is a growing body of literature characterising 'community resilience' (Madsen & O'Mullan, 2016), that incorporates elements of 'social connectedness, economic development and social capital' (Norris et al., 2008), in Puerto Rico the dominant notion of resilience alludes primarily to individual

skills and abilities (Serrano García, 2019). More recent conceptualisations of resilience acknowledge contextual and structural variables and the need for social justice in response to socio-natural disasters (Serrano García, 2019).

Valle Hill is now one of many communities in Puerto Rico still struggling to recover after María, as they engage in new forms of collective actions to rebuild, decide how they want to re-build, considering how to transform their relationships with municipal and state governments, as well as with the private sector and other institutions and service organisations. These are groups and communities trying to change the rules of the game, exploring creative ways of *autogestión*, of relying less on government to strengthen local and economic initiatives. Autonomous organising does not imply removing the state's responsibility to guarantee the basic rights of all citizens. In fact, it implies the opposite, to promote the empowerment/strengthening of citizens and communities to demand what they deserve, when they need it. This is similar to what Serrano García (2019) calls 'sovereign acts' because people 'are convinced that the system in which they find themselves can be organized differently and implement ideas and practices that vary from those that are currently in place' (p. 13).

Our intervention was intended to contribute to empowerment and autonomous organising that, in turn, would result in more access to the essential services that, by virtue of human rights, every person deserves. The three main activities developed with the residents were consistent with these goals: residents (including children) were now engaged in shared and individual projects, and had a plan to follow up on their stated goals. Residents acknowledged this when the work plan did not respond exclusively to their immediate needs after the catastrophe. Both residents and our group, however, realised that building the aqueduct was a long-term goal that would require consistent and hard work to accomplish.

Is it possible that autonomous organising processes that strengthen self-determination of individuals, groups, neighbourhoods and communities could be transferred to the political sphere? Will this process serve to derive lessons about the collective potential to transform social relations, relations with the state and relations with the United States? The dialogue about the opportunities and challenges to practice a decolonial community psychology that questions the epistemological hegemony that arises from the

western and colonial history of Social Sciences must continue.

Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge the excellent work the following graduate students did in the Valle Hill community and in the conceptualisation of this article: Diana Betancur, Ishi Maldonado, Orlando Maldonado, Sergio Marichal, Miriam Morales, Joselyn Rosado, Vaneishka Vélez.

I am very thankful to Aurora Santiago Ortiz and Mario Rodriguez Cancel for their support and collaboration in the submission of the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Note

1. Brusi and Godreau (2019) have documented how the government of Puerto Rico has been dismantling public education by defunding and/or closing schools.

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