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Symposium on the Life and Work of Ignacio Martín-Baró:

Introduction and Reflections

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Abstract

An integration of the papers in this symposium on the life and work of Ignacio Martín-Baró reflects their application, as in any good study of a life, of several levels of analysis ranging from the macro to the micro. Based in historical, social psychological, narrative life history, and legal approaches, the papers reveal how individuals, as participants in small and larger groups, and social, cultural, and political institutions, contend with intensive and widespread conflict and struggle; before and with the hope of the return of peace. Following this introduction, the author reflects on the impressions that Nacho as a committed scholar with an extraordinary sensitivity to history and social justice made on her career as a social scientist and teacher.
An Event

On February 24, 2010, the Doctoral Program in Social/Personality Psychology at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York (CUNY) held an event to commemorate the life and work of Ignacio Martín-Baró. The day honored the 20th anniversary of the massacre of Martín-Baró, five of his fellow Jesuits, and their housekeeper and her daughter, at their university, University of Central American “José Simeón Cañas” (UCA). In November of 1989, they were assassinated by soldiers of El Salvador’s Atlacatl Battalion, a battalion trained in the U.S.A. Our day of commemoration included research presentations, film showings, group discussions and celebration through food, drink, and music. More than 70 people attended and represented a rich and diverse set of backgrounds, skills, and gifts.

To emphasize Martín-Baró’s point that research needs to begin with the people, a roundtable discussion on contemporary collaborative participatory research included seasoned academic researchers, graduate students, and Yanira Arias, Vice-President of the Salvadoran American National Network. We sought to embody Martín-Baró’s call to researchers to place the concept of the people at the center of our research, understand the

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1 The day long event was sponsored by all of the following programs based at the CUNY Graduate Center: The Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies, The Latino and Latin American Students Association, the Doctoral Student Council, and the National Science Foundation AGEP SBE Program. The Department of Latin American and Latina/Latino Studies and the Department of Sociology of John Jay College of Criminal Justice also provided sponsorship.
people in the particulars of their historical context and recognize them as responsible for their own history. To represent the extent to which Martín-Baró’s commitment to research was based in and supported by his faith, the day began and ended with a blessing by Reverend Luis Barrios, professor of psychology and chair of the Department of Latin American and Latina/o Studies at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, who also spoke about his research on “Gangs and the Spirituality of Liberation.”

The event included Salvadoran music and singing with the popular folksinger, Aracely Sanchez. Participants shared pupusas, the Salvadoran typical food par excellence, prepared by friends from the Latino AIDS Commission. A photography exhibit, “Luchadoras ‘Women Warriors’ Mohila Joddha,” filled the walls of the conference room with portraits by women of the Center for Immigrant Families, a group supported by the The Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights.

Three Papers and a Coda

Three of the research papers presented at that event have been expanded for presentation in this special issue. Based in historical, social psychological/community, and narrative life history approaches, the papers reveal how individuals, as participants in family, small and larger groups, and social, cultural, and political institutions, contend with intensive and widespread conflict and struggle; before and with the hope of the return of peace. Although the focus is on the particular person of Martín-Baró, the papers reveal knowledge that goes beyond his life. An integration of the papers in this symposium on Ignacio Martín-Baró reflects their application, as in any good study of a life, of several levels of analysis and illumination working through the macro-societal, meso-situational, and the micro-individual (Pettigrew, 1998). Like Martín-Baró, the
authors of the set of papers in this symposium are not held back by and instead
effectively cross borders between social science disciplines; notably, psychology,
sociology, history, and anthropology.

We begin with the paper by the historian, Joaquín Chávez, because it so effectively
sets the distinctive stage upon which Martín-Baró did his work. His particular focus is
the description of a remarkable university, Central American University “José Simeón
Cañas” (UCA) in San Salvador. Radically changed and sustained by a group of Jesuit
priests, this university became a structure for social change. Chávez also goes beyond
UCA in his story of El Salvador from the mid-1950s through the early 1990s. He traces
the actions, events, and actors involved in changes in the relationships between Jesuits
and relationships between Jesuits and the Salvadoran elites; changes in the larger Roman
Catholic church; and changes in the coalitions between government agencies, business
associations, death squads, and the powerful individuals who were participants in one of
more of these groups. He introduces us to the people with whom Martín-Baró worked,
the propaganda and other threats he faced, and the mission of a university in which he
was a key player.

As Chávez reveals details about the university and the social and political situation
of the period, he also provides a useful primer on the liberation psychology envisioned by
Martín-Baró. As he puts it, “The legacy of Ignacio Martín-Baró is inextricably linked to
construction of the UCA as an institution deeply identified with the dispossessed.”
(Chávez, this issue, p. xxx). Given Martín-Baró’s goal to craft a psychology that would
be responsive to its time, place, and people, it is right that an historian who portrays the
setting would simultaneously and effectively depict the psychological work.
About history, Chávez shows that it is not simply a recording of what happened in the past. He presents Martín-Baró’s research as helping us understand what is happening now. In order to comprehend what Martín-Baró was trying to do as a psychologist, we need to place the work in its historical context, i.e., in the past; but then, with that understanding in hand, we can go on to see and disclose what is now happening to, for, and by people in Central America, the U.S., and elsewhere. Particularly with regard to Martín-Baró’s extensive studies on the psychological and social effects of political repression, the analysis of “the ramifications of political violence among repressors, victims, and spectators and the behaviors it foments help us to identify the connections between legacies of the war and the high levels of social violence and crime that characterize contemporary Salvadoran society.” (Chávez, this issue, p. xxx).

Finally, for this author who is a psychologist, Chávez teaches the important lesson that as we look “up” to larger social structures, we should not assume that there is a single position represented. In structures, such as that of the Jesuit religious order, there are many positions that need to be taken into account. Structures and institutions need to be brought into our research as entities that are multiple and changing.

The second paper tells us more about the particular life led on the complicated stage that was El Salvador from the mid 1950s through the 1980s. The paper by Nelson Portillo, a social psychologist who is now teaching at UCA, tells of his dialogue with the life, work, and legacy of Martín-Baró. Portillo’s work is grounded in interviews with several people who knew Martín-Baró well, including his brother who remained in Spain; and in personal and family records to which he gained access. The paper well makes the point that the story of a life is the story of all of the following: relationships between a
child and parents, a family, a community, religious orders like the Jesuits, friendships within that order and outside, an evolving Catholic Church, relationships between countries, and universities and the research structures that they enable. Portillo’s paper also provides us a look at how one person’s life and career can have a profound influence of the life and career of another researcher, even one from another time and generation.

Portillo’s is not a reductionistic case study that locates causes of a life in childhood or unconscious forces, but rather a life history that reveals the challenges and opportunities that Martín-Baró encountered, the decisions he made, the life projects he chose, and the many structures with which he contended. He makes good use of new narrative biographical techniques, such as the researcher’s exercise of self-reflexivity and explicit statement of his place in the research. As a discipline-crossing author in this symposium, Portillo effectively crosses from psychology into literature and the use of visual media (photographs) to reveal something of Martín-Baró and the impact of his life and work on others. The essay/poem, Nacho, the Magician, by the famous Spanish writer Miguel Delibes is not to be missed.

The paper by Brinton Lykes, community and social psychologist and a founder of the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights, tells the story of this Fund and its twenty years of supportive fund-raising, grant-making, education, and advocacy across many communities, at the grassroots level. The Fund seeks to respond to Martín-Baró’s call for a new kind of psychology, one that would help create both a new society and a new person. For this, the Fund makes collaborations with survivors of conflict who are involved in change of social structures and crafting of new community ties an essential component of their work. Lykes provides an overview of the Fund’s
work and then offers portraits of particular groups of collaborators, *The Association of Maya Ixil Women – New Dawn* (ADMI) and the *Center for Mayan Ixil Education and Development* (ACEFOMI) in Guatemala and *The Children's Rehabilitation Center* (CRC) in Quezon City, the Philippines.

Lykes offers important lessons about the recent history and current state of the discipline of psychology. She explains how she and other North American psychologists saw early on in Martín-Baró’s work a connection with their own research and practice that had been relegated to the margins of North American psychology (as a result of being too soft, too political, too not positivistic, etc.). Viewing the connection with his work that so clearly reflected the lived experiences of marginalized people of color, women, and the poor enabled them to experience the affirmation and hopefulness of their own work. The margins of psychology, as witnessed in this journal and other contemporary efforts, including those in qualitative and narrative psychology, increasingly show the power of the margins. Martín-Baró’s work needs be recognized as at the forefront of this movement.

Lykes’ piece demonstrates the value of links between psychologists across geographical borders. It also shows the value of breaking down the borders between what have become fortress-like domains of psychology. New research and activist endeavors that meld clinical, social, community, and cultural psychology develop and enact Martín-Baró’s idea that pathology is understood only when one looks, not to the so-called inside of the individual, but to the outside that makes up the familial, social, cultural, and political context within which that individual is. For example, the Fund supports cross-psychology work that discovers the too-frequently neglected causes of
health-damaging violence in sources like U.S. policies and practices within and outside the U.S.

With regard to the future of psychology, Lykes also provides grounds for optimism. The special kind of collaborative research that the Fund supports has led to special kinds of new knowledge, new knowledge of many sorts. For example, one of three urgent challenges that Martín-Baró linked to liberation psychology was the development of theoretical and methodological tools through which psychologist researchers could come to reveal and utilize the people’s virtues and special strengths. Lykes shows us just that in operation; for example, as she describes the use of Mayan folklore in workshops where a community seeks to heal its own wounds and move forward. Another kind of new knowledge comes from voices and action “on the ground…from the bottom up” to disclose the damaging effects of what state and global governments do, often “in our names.” With regard to structures that will support this and other liberatory research, Lykes reviews recent promising changes in the Fund such as the movement of its work into the university. So placed, the Fund’s work engages teams of students, staff, and faculty, and trains new generations of activist scholars.

Following the piece by Lykes, we have placed a coda that brings us to the present. The murder of Martín-Baró and the five other priests and their housekeeper and her daughter has never been properly investigated and prosecuted. Yet, in May, 2011, a Spanish judge issued a 77-page indictment and arrest warrants for Salvadoran ex-officers who have been charged with crimes against humanity and state terrorism for their role in these crimes. Almudena Bernabeu and Carolyn Patty Blum, lawyers working with the Center for Justice and Accountability based in San Francisco, provide an overview of this
legal case. They also describe other efforts in El Salvador, Spain, and the United States led by the Center for Justice and Accountability to seek justice for the murders and reveal the accountability of the “intellectual authors” of the murders, men once at the highest levels of leadership in El Salvador.

**Personal Reflections**

In the late summer of 1976, an old and dear friend, a member of the Chicago Jesuit community and Professor of Bioethics, asked me if I would be willing to talk with a younger Jesuit who had just arrived from El Salvador to study at The University of Chicago. Ignacio Martín-Baró (Nacho) was feeling some anxiety and intimidation around the commencement of his social science training at Chicago. I was a lecturer at the university and assistant director of the interdisciplinary master’s in social sciences program in which Nacho would matriculate. Of course, I said yes. Soon after, a man seeming to be in his mid-thirties, a bit older than I, appeared in the office doorway. I saw first a face full of deep seriousness and some hesitation. But the face also bore a little smile, a smile that spoke of wit and the ability to appreciate irony. Being then deep in the reading of Kierkegaard, I was always on the lookout for those savvy about irony. After the face came the clothing: sandals and a serape. The latter was not a clothes item that one typically saw in Hyde Park. I did my best to make him feel comfortable in what had always struck me as much too corporate a space for a university. In Nacho’s presence, the fancy glass and metal felt even more inappropriate. It was not long into our conversation that I began to lose sight of the anxiety and shyness that I had been told about and initially observed. In little time, the strongest impression I felt was the presence of one of the smartest people I was ever likely to meet. I was still very new to
the academic advising work, but I was convinced I had met a rare person. His grasp of social science theory and method, his hold on the history of social science and the particular field of social psychology, his awareness of the latest studies and their findings, and his clarity about why he had chosen to continue graduate studies was startling. As an adviser, I knew I would have more than the usual amount of work cut out for me. All I could do was trust my ability to learn more than I knew and put on my seatbelt. And then, of course, there was his smile and the laugh that soon came to accompany it in our conversation. Nacho’s was a voice that could speak with great animation and force about social science – what was wrong with it and what wonderful possibilities for social justice it promised. It was also a voice that could sing.

*I judged it good pedagogy, both for interest and for sound thinking, to anchor the subject right at the outset in real people’s lives.*

White, 1987, p. 32

I have told that story about my first meeting with Nacho to twenty-seven cohorts of entering Ph.D. students in Social/Personality Psychology. Given that I went on to work with Nacho throughout his time at Chicago (he was my first Ph.D. student whose dissertation I was honored to sponsor), there were many things I could have told all those students about Nacho. For example, there were his uniquely orchestrated study habits that enabled him to finish papers, exams, even a dissertation in record time; and his commitment to living fully several areas of life and the schedule he unwaveringly kept to never let academic work take over other areas. I am sure I did cover those and other issues about the seriousness of Nacho as a student, but it seemed especially important early on to let the students know that he did feel anxious, that he felt the same sorts of
worries and intimidations about the university that they themselves were feeling. It was also important to share that it was okay for the anxiety to show and to be part of a very complex presentation of self that also included serious academic talk and laughter.

And then there was the matter of Nacho’s clarity about why came to graduate school, why he was at The University of Chicago. I wanted my students (and me) to understand that clarity and to struggle after it in our own attachments to the university. Nacho came to The University of Chicago eager and determined to learn as much as he could about social psychology. After all, he had a lot of work waiting for him back in El Salvador. He wanted to apply there the best of what social science has to offer. The excellence of Nacho’s work at Chicago, his unique productivity and creativity certainly had to do with things like his intelligence, the sweep and depth of his reading in contemporary social science and its foundations, his attention to history, the training in philosophy, and the extraordinary discipline that had become habit; but it struck me as having to do most with the clarity of his choice.

His decision to be a student and a scholar was a strongly displayed choice that supported a commitment to his work and also, the integration of his work and the rest of his life. It was also a choice grounded in his faith. In my own silent musings and in those I have shared with students, I have wondered if one could do the kind of work that Nacho did without that faith; and if yes, what exactly might it be that would serve as a viable alternative to faith. The papers by Chávez, Portillo, and Lykes detail the external and internal structures -- the social, political, cultural, religious, and psychological realities – that accompanied Nacho’s faith and enabled it to have the effects in the world
that it had. Yet, the basis and foundation for all were the faith, Nacho’s faith in God and in the people.

Among my fondest memories of the time I spent with Nacho, right alongside those about his love of parties, good food, singing and guitar playing, are those about our ongoing scholarly debates about the relation between individuals and society. On my side of things, that of the personality psychologist, there was the focus on the single person. Mine was a search for how that single person had the responsibility and the ability to shape and change society. Nacho would listen patiently to me but then go on to argue for the power of society to shape and change individuals. It was clear that Nacho thought I was being much too optimistic about the power of the individual, that I was not sufficiently taking into account the importance of social, political, and historical forces. He would tell me that I had read enough of the French, but not enough from the Spanish existentialists.

Now, having looked at a lot of social science data and having simply gotten older, I have to grant Nacho more of his points. I had minimized the irrational and not recognized enough the power and horror of those extra-individual forces that Nacho described so well. I also need, however, to say to Nacho that I am still not giving up my side, and that he is in large part responsible for why I cannot give it up. In his life and in his death, Nacho provides a great deal of empirical support for the power of the single person. Nacho is indeed a person who shapes society, a person who provokes change and I believe growth in us all.

In our Doctoral Program in Social/Personality Psychology at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York (CUNY), we have sought meaningfully to integrate
the two subfields of psychology not only to better understand the debates about relationships between individuals and society; but also to address sources of injustice and seek to build the new person and the new society that Nacho envisioned. He has proved an important ally in our efforts. His writings have been included in our orientation and required core course materials and his emphasis upon an historical sensibility in psychology has shaped our foundational teaching and exam structures. In his definition of personality as that of which people are robbed in conditions of injustice, he has even given us a new way of thinking about personality psychology; a way that better links that enterprise with an activist, participatory social psychology and other forms of critical psychology. The commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of his death was not an isolated unique connection with his work. It was a celebration of his longstanding important influence in our program. It was also a marking of his work’s increasing relevance as our program builds its resources in critical perspectives and recommits to activist research taken up as a collective project. We held the blessing on our day of commemoration in room in which all of our students will defend their dissertations; a room recently renamed the Ignacio Martín-Baró Thesis Room.
REFERENCES


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