

Methods for Liberation: Critical Consciousness in Action

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Many Latin American psychologists have chosen social transformation as the main goal for the field of social psychology in its community and political branches. Doing psychology for social transformation means that, whatever the object of psychology as a science is – be it the study of the psyche; of individual or collective behavior; of ideology; of language or verbal behavior; of the so-called cognitive mediating processes; of emotion and motivation; and so on – it will always be at the service of social transformation. Social transformation in this context refers to changes in the dominant structural and cultural institutions of a society seeking more equitable and sustainable social arrangements that satisfy the basic needs of all people. It also is an endless cause as every transformation carries within it the germ of new ones, because there is no such a thing as a perfect society. In this context, social transformation is understood as a result of processes initiated by those who are oppressed by the dominant social structures and cultural narratives of a society. Chief among the forces behind social transformations are the processes of conscientization and problematization.

Conscientization, Problematization, and the Dynamic Character of Liberation

Psychologists wanting to produce social transformations have discovered, as other social researchers have done before, that consciousness is involved in the process. Freire (1973/1964) and Vieira Pinto (1964) created the concept of conscientization, a process necessary to generate social changes, carried out by the people who should benefit from the changes. Conscientization has been defined as a mobilization of consciousness aiming to produce historic knowledge about oneself and about the

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groups to which one belongs, thereby producing a different understanding, and giving sense to one's temporal and spatial place in the society, and in one's specific life-world.¹ Conscientization develops critical capacity allowing consciousness to be liberated from the dominant conceptions given by society, and by people's life-worlds, responding to interests' alien to one's living conditions. It is not restricted to cognitive aspects for it also mobilizes emotion in order to attain awareness about the circumstances influencing one's living conditions.

Methods directly related to conscientization, specifically generated to produce that process are difficult to find, if nonexistent. Usually, conscientization is approached by way of programs or actions directed to transform everyday life situations and specific problems present in them. There are not directions to be followed, techniques to be employed according to manuals, or carefully developed and tested directions. These may be useless because underlying that sort of methodology is the conception of conscientization as a unitary process.

The mode of community psychology and of critical psychology developed in many Latin American countries, and the psychology of liberation (or social psychology of liberation as it is also called), have openly manifested social transformation as their ultimate goal. But what is not so clear is the way in which that goal is to be obtained, for so far, there are no methods explicitly formulated with that task in mind. In the many papers presented in the International Conferences of Social Psychology of Liberation that have been held since 1998 in several Latin American countries, a good number of them make use of participatory action research (PAR) and social psychology methods employed with a liberating sense and direction. What predominates in them is:

1. *PAR and other participatory methods.* This is easily explained by the fact that incorporating the participation of the people suffering adverse social conditions, being in need or excluded from social benefits, constitutes a source of transformation not only regarding that very situation upon which they act, but also for them as active participants. Community psychology is full of examples illustrating this point (Montero, 1994a, 1994b, 2006; Rodríguez Gabarrón & Hernández Landa, 1994; Santiago, Serrano-García, & Perfecto, 1992).
2. *Biographical methods (life histories and narratives; autobiographies, field notes).* This approach also places both the researchers and the people whose lives are researched in a relationship of coparticipation and collaboration. It allows a form of historic recuperation obtained by way of a critical reflection revealing the meanings and relations hidden by the censorship of forgetfulness or oblivion that protected the people from sorrowful memories of painful facts thereby impeding them from confronting those events. Consciousness in these methods is expressed through the critical analyses and subsequent understanding

¹ Concept introduced by A. Schutz and T. Luckmann (1973). Life-world (*lebenswelt*) is understood as the ambit of reality which a normal conscientious person considers as part of common sense and where she or he can influence and be influenced by others. It includes those objects and events in one's psychologically immediate environment.

that go along with the memories brought back. Used with a liberating sense, these methods open the gates of remembrances allowing the critical acknowledgment of those facts, recognizing oneself as a main actor; as a victim or as the responsible person; as excluded or as the excluding one, and with that knowledge begin the transformation of modes of relation, of identification, of action, and of being; and simultaneously transforming one's environment.

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However, there are some general principles derived from practice developed by Paulo Freire (1970): A sequence of actions and reflections, through dialog, about those actions (action–reflection–action). Social transformation and consciousness of its effects, as well as the construction of meaning for what was transformed and what has been made, have its base in doing and reflecting about that. This is praxis.² So, this praxis-based approach to transformation is neither totally abstract nor totally empirical, but the union of both sources changes. It is practice within the social conditions to be changed, and reflection is used to problematize these social conditions, a process that produces deideologizing and dealienating by way of a process of critical reasoning leading to a new way of understanding what is happening in the life-world. Deideologization is, then, the conscious construction and reconstruction of an understanding of the world one lives in, and of one's living circumstances, as part of a totality (Montero, 1994, 2004). Dealienation is understood as the process through which the relation between consciousness and the historical and social living conditions of a person and her or his role in them are established, so that person is aware of that relation.

Problematization erodes the foundations of certain beliefs and habits, and there could not be a change in consciousness if that first step, if that attitude is not generated in people. Otherwise, we would be dealing with an uncritical acceptance of ideologies, or what has been called indoctrination. Liberation then has a dynamic character and starts with problematization, that is, the critical and puzzling doubting about the knowledge so far considered as the way for things to be.

Because there is very little guidance with regard to methodologies that promote social transformation, in this chapter I present some methods which currently are very popular in liberation psychology, and then, devote the better part of this paper to problematization and a discussion of the possibility of following a systematic path for something which is not controlled or under the absolute direction of psychologists or other external agents

²Practice informing theory and theory generating practice.

Participatory Methods and Liberation

Participation is basic for liberation. As the Freire quotation in the chapter “Introduction” implies, liberation is not something someone possesses and grants, lends, or bestows to some other people. Liberation is collectively and individually built, obtained, and won. That is the reason for participation to be a *sine qua non* condition, and it explains why liberation psychology has adopted and employs participatory methods.

Those methods generally used in anthropology and in some sociological research, have been present in psychology, but not exempt of certain distrust due to their qualitative nature. This began to change some 30 years ago, and in Latin America, as far as the end of the 1950s, when critical sociology studies were carried out by Orlando Fals Borda and other sociologists, members of the La Rosca group in Colombia, who began to create what is known today as PAR. The idea of action research came from a posthumous paper by Kurt Lewin published in the *Journal of Social Issues* (Lewin, 1946), where he coined the idea of action research. But what those sociologists did was different: They included the so-called research subjects in the decisions and actions concerning the research tasks; hence, the term “participatory.” This way to research, and as a result to produce transformations, did not have a name for 13 years (1957–1970). Fals Borda (1959) simply called it action research, in spite of *participation* being its main feature. So it was not until the 1970s (Fals Borda, 1978) that there was recognition that sociologists, anthropologists, and Freirian educators throughout Latin America were engaging in a different kind of method.

Participatory action research (PAR) is:

a methodological process and strategy actively incorporating those people and groups affected by a problem, in such a way that they become co-researchers through their action in the different phases and moments of the research carried out to solve the problem. Their participation places the locus of power and of control within their groups (Montero, 1980, 1984), mobilises their resources, leads them to acquire new ones, in order to transform their living conditions, their immediate environment and the power relations established with other groups or institutions in their society (Montero, 2000, p. 134).

An important characteristic of participatory methods fostering liberation is related to the role power plays within its goals. Participation empowers the people, and as is the case of PAR, it is also directed to their conscientization. As liberating methods, participatory modes of research may then include the main process leading to liberation. In the case of PAR, its emancipative character is evidenced in its capacity to empower participants, strengthening their resources and developing their ability to acquire new resources and redefine themselves as able citizens with rights and duties, and the capacity to defend their achievements and demand what is due to them. And it is also a democratizing instrument, as this type of collective action and reflection strengthens civil society.

Discursive Aspects of Liberation Methods

If participation is the cornerstone for methods developed in community-oriented work with a liberating aim, dialog is its complementing aspect. It introduces polyphony as the multiple voices of the participants are heard and responded to. Again, this owes its introduction to Paulo Freire, who also insisted in incorporating the people's knowledge, and its divulgation to Fals Borda and critical sociology. Psychology, specifically in its community branch, adopted it around the mid-1970s, and it was embraced by the psychology of liberation from its beginning in 1986. In community psychology, much of which has been carried out with a liberating sense, professional and scientific expertise is added to the participants' expertise about their culture, their lives, and their community know-how; thus giving way to new forms of knowledge.

Dialog means a relationship between researchers and external agents in general, and people (internal agents of change as they are called by community psychology) engaged in transformation programs, expressed by horizontal communication carried out in discussions, opinions, debates, and collective and individual reflection. Aspects provided by discourse and conversation analysis, deconstruction of discourses, and understanding of rhetoric and its discursive strategies are needed in collective discussion, not for the better manipulation of groups, but in order to reveal their meaning-creating ways and to introduce their effects into the discussions. And if this sounds very sophisticated, it is not. Rhetoric is used everyday by all kinds of people, even if they do not know the names of the figures and tropes they are using. We all unknowingly use rhetoric in our daily lives. And we all are able to discuss its effects and its modes of generating sense. The role of the psychologist is to reveal the discursive mechanisms being used in order to defend, hide, show, or create interest during conversations.

Critique and Liberation Methods

Participation and dialog during action and reflection in equal conditions of expression are complemented by critique. Critical modes of carrying out transformative research were already being used in social sciences since the 1960s (Albó & Barrios, 1978; Barreiro, 1974/1986; Demo, 1985; Freire, 1973/1964; Parra, Hoyod, Roux, & Jaramillo, 1978; Rodríguez Brandao, 1981, 1987; Vio Grossi, 1981). Critical in the context of liberation means the capacity to discuss, conscientiously dissenting or agreeing, in such a way that a situation or piece of knowledge is restructured according to the results of comparing, contrasting, and analyzing a variety of viewpoints coming from the discussants. It can also lead to radically change the way of considering and understanding things, relations, and events in our life.

Critique is not good or bad in itself, it is just part of the complexity of the world we live in, a reminder that social phenomena and events in daily life can have more than one definition; more than one interpretation, and that there is a reason behind every one of them (Montero & Fernández Christlieb, 2003). But critique is always disturbing and irritating, in the sense that it stirs, ruffles, and agitates the still (and deep) waters of quotidian life. It disturbs the apparently peaceful kingdom of certainties. That is its task, and that is why the psychology of liberation includes critical methods; because in order to transform many things it has to move into the first place, consciousness. Critique then is an important tool for conscientization and for the processes leading to it, including problematization which is methodologically and epistemologically discussed in this chapter.

Consciousness in Action

The conscientization process begins with the people's participation and the discussion–reflection which is part of the sequence action–reflection–action (in organized community groups or in other forms of gathering). This supposes a variety of ways to problematize naturalized modes of understanding and interpreting daily life and events happening within it. Problematization is a way to challenge accepted explanations for those phenomena that have been assumed as normal and logical in daily life, but which make people's lives difficult; even painful, unfair, and hard. Therefore, problematizing leads to a subprocess of denaturalizing what has been defined and imposed as the natural way for things to be. It is the consideration of something created according to certain specific interests, as if it were essential. This entails breaking some habits deeply socialized and some beliefs deeply embedded.

Why is it needed to denaturalize those beliefs and habits? If they have been considered as the natural way of things to be, probably one can imagine that there has been a very convincing reason to begin with. Besides, the word denaturalization really sounds antinatural. Everyday we get to know daily things and events, and as part of quotidian life we assimilate them to other objects already known and accepted. Those are ways to facilitate our relationships with what is new, strange, or different; ways to make acceptable those circumstances, therefore internalizing this “familiarized knowledge” considering it as part of “the way the world is” (Montero, 2004), making them habitual. The explanation for this resides in the psychosocial processes linked both to the modes of knowing and to the ideologizing mechanisms accompanying those modes; joining then certain interests to cultural ways in order to impose some ideas and explanations over others. As not all forms of naturalizing are negative or evil, because naturalization is a normal and necessary process within daily life; the process of deideologizing through reflection and dialogical discussion is needed to find out those modes linked to exclusion or oppression.

Deideologization is then another subprocess in the overall general process of conscientization. It consists of rejecting the hegemony of certain ideas justifying and naturalizing forms of social oppression, by showing how certain interpretations and

senses, socially constructed and taught, operate in people's daily life. This supposes the need to separate negative forms of naturalization depriving people from the possibility to attain a different kind of life, or of exerting their right to have social benefits.

From these ontological, epistemological, political, and ethical bases, originally developed in community psychology praxis and understood with a liberationist character, problematization has been developed as part of putting into action what is being promoted as the discourse of social transformation. It should be considered as part of a general methodological proposal more than a specific technique. This does not mean that technical forms of carrying it out cannot or should not be created; but as it is an approach to be applied as a function of specific situations what I am presenting here is not to be considered as a set of procedures. It is just the paradigmatic framework for problematization within a liberation perspective.

Problematization as a Methodological Tool

As a critical process, problematization generates disagreement, doubts, and discussion, as simultaneously, it starts a process of consciousness mobilization leading to conscientization, inducing transformations in the modes of understanding certain phenomena.

The Origins of Problematization

The concept of problematization was constructed by Freire (1970) in relation to what he called a "banking education," which he opposed. By banking education Freire understood a type of education in which, as happens in banks when people deposits money, the students were turned into a sort of deposit for other people's ideas, and remote forms of knowledge, without discussing their meaning and usefulness. That is, students were a sort of knowledge piggybanks, receiving but not digesting. As Freire said, education thus understood is a form of oppression to which he proposed a problematizing and liberating education, one which would generate "consciousness about consciousness" (Freire, p. 85). Hence, education is not an end in itself but a means to produce knowledge in both members of the educational relationship: the educator and the person being educated (Freire). That relationship is not based in the superiority of the former and the inferiority of the latter, but in their dialog.

What is Problematization?

For Freire, then, problematization is a process produced within a dialogical relationship carried out in "reading circles," that is groups of people in the adult education programs he created in Brazil and other Latin American countries, as well as

in Africa and Asia. It should be added that it is a strategy for developing a critical consciousness which while taking place during both action and reflection, transforms through them the naturalizing and alienating circumstances. Problematization sensitizes, denaturalizes, and establishes the cognitive and affective bases necessary to motivate changes thus inducing concrete transforming actions.

In community social psychology to problematize is to generate situations in which the people involved are forced to review their actions and opinions about daily life events considered not only as ordinary circumstances, but also as inevitable because of their attributed essential way of being. This happens in such a way that their critical discussion leads them to being aware of the oppression, exclusion, undervaluation, or uncritical reproduction of information received which has negative effects for their daily lives. And, in so doing, they also examine the relation between that knowledge and other temporally and spatially contextualized possibilities for living and knowing, and their possible transformation.

The mobilization of consciousness moves the person or group from the uncritically accepted version of reality to the possibility of transforming life into better living conditions. It also may alert the person or group about the existence of situations and forms of oppression, acquiring in this way a liberating and deideologizing character. This happens because the consciousness movement generates new knowledge and awareness about certain social relations, questioning at the same time the hegemony of certain ideas maintaining or justifying specific situations. In this sense, problematization fosters the production of a political standing understood in the wider meaning of the term “politics”; because it impels the construction and reconstruction of an integral consciousness and an understanding of the society one lives in as a totality.

This ends in what Freire (1970, 1997) called the “domestication” of mind and action. That is, the repetition of certain living routines maintaining and reproducing daily life circumstances, in spite of the limitations and misery they may occasion. That is, the repeated and meaningless gestures, the senseless words stating that nothing is problematic because a specific way of life is and its problems are part of the nature of life.

Domestication is characterized by the submission to what psychological attribution theories have denominated the Powerful Others: Facts, personages, phenomena external and independent of the people affected by them, which are attributed the power responsible for the success or failure of people’s actions. So, people do not consider themselves actors and constructors of their realities, but just passive receptors of the good and evil emanating from those superior entities, owners of the first and last word.

What is the Object of the Problematization Process? Who are its Subjects?

The object of problematization is the circumstance, fact, or mode of knowing producing stereotyped explanations or versions perpetuating certain conditions affecting specific groups or individuals. It is a concrete, tangible, and lived fact. There are

two subjects: The people affected by a particular condition of domination or oppression and exclusion, and those who pretend to facilitate or catalyze a liberation process. That is so because in order to be a problematizing agent it is necessary to have an ethical approach including respect for human, social, civil, and political rights. If that agent neither understands the situation nor knows the objective to meet, that means that he or she has naturalized the object to problematize, and he/she needs to problematize that circumstance him/herself.

Problematization is a total process, one cannot be partially problematized, or problematized now and then, regarding a specific issue. It is a process happening within relationships. It happens in the relationship between external agents (psychologists or other people) and internal agents (those living or believing something that is painful or harmful for them), in which consciousness is mobilized for its transformation. It is also a process of mutual apprenticeship produced through dialog that exposes the naturalizations, the beliefs, and the arguments in general concerning a specific issue. That is why this method has no techniques or instruments or procedures that can be generalized to every possible situation. It only has principles upon which practice can be constructed.

Conditions for a Problematization Process

1. *Listening.* Whoever pretends to problematize must know to listen. Freire (1997) said that it is by listening that one can learn how to talk with people. And that is because only when we listen we can detect the naturalized aspects in the reasoning being expressed, therefore being able to pose the questions, that induce the problematizing process leading to conscientization.
2. *Dialog.* Listening is not enough. If one does not establishes a dialogic relationship, one is leaving the other outside, separating her/him from the research/intervention process which affects that person.
3. *Taking care of the ways to participate in that dialog.* One should not talk in a scholarly manner, using an imposing tone of voice and mannerisms. This does not means to diminish the quality of language, as some people do when talking with people carrying some sort of incapacity or difference. One should never talk as if the other person could not understand or learn what we are saying. If one uses some technical word or abstract concept, it should be illustrated with examples and should be analyzed and discussed with the interlocutors. Understanding is not an academic or restricted privilege.
4. *Dialog means communication.* That is the bilateral relationship exchanging knowledge. It is never a unilateral form of reception or transmission. There must be the possibility to dissent, discuss, respond, and ask. There should be place for curiosity and creativity and for humor and emotion.
5. *Humility and respect.* This also is a bilateral condition. In a dialog participants must mutually respect each other. No one is superior to anyone; we all have the right to be different, while being equals.

6. *Critique*. This should be understood not as destructive commentaries, but as a form of analysis revealing the sense being constructed within the dialog. The critical content of problematization unchains the denaturalization and deideologizing processes. That critique is not dictated by the external agents, but is generated by the problematizing effect reached by questioning and by reflective discussing. These can be induced by freedom to speak out and also by techniques which, by way of metaphors incorporated to action, force people to review their knowledge and beliefs about some circumstance or event.
7. In this sense, problematization is a process beginning within a dialog but developed in the conscience of its participants. It is first evidenced by the silence produced when one cannot continue arguing with the naturalized forms of knowledge one may have, because one can neither reason nor provide new answers for a discussion, evidencing the contradictions and relationships so far not perceived.
8. As said before, problematization *always refers to specific concrete situations* in everyday life (what is called real) within the people's environment and to the knowledge employed to refer to those circumstances.
9. Problematization has a *reflexive character* because its main function is to generate the critical examination of the problematized action or situation.
10. It is related to what Goldmann (1972) called *possible consciousness*, referring to other possibilities to understand what is happening in our lives. That possibility for change is part of the *transformation* process since it allows understanding the unacceptable condition of the situation or the action examined. This aspect may lead to what Freire referred to as defining the situation as the *limit* of what is to be suffered or accepted. It motivates actions aimed to change the negative conditions. But results do not depend exclusively on consciousness and liberating and transformational motivation, therefore changes can be partial or slow, according to the specific conditions of each particular setting and the resources obtained and mobilized. This aspect has to be taken into account in order to avoid the uncritical risk of falling into romantic or "heroic" positions, unrelated to concrete material situations.

The Problematizing Process

Problematization begins when a question or action induces doubt about a specific version or explanation for a fact or event in everyday life. This could be called the "trigger effect" starting a critical process of analysis of that circumstance. The question or reflexive comment or action could be directly posed to someone or directed to a group which can be addressed both by external or internal agents³ working with them.

³*External agents*: psychologists, other social workers, NGO's workers, all those who come to a community from some institution or organization not belonging to the community. *Internal agents*: community stakeholders and organized groups.

The problematizing process is both emotional and cognitive. There are links between cognition and affectivity inducing people to critically examine and discuss concrete conditions of life, leading thus to the possibility of rejecting explanations and beliefs so far sustained.

The cognitive and affective mobilization in this critical process induces the questioning of naturalized conceptions about a certain circumstance by showing its contradictions and its relationships with certain social, economic, or political interests. Also forms in which power is being exerted and its consequences may be understood in a different way, as well as the weak points in that mode of reasoning. In this way begins the rejection or change of ideas about the object discussed (critical mistrust or rejection). That is, people start to consider that those ideas are not the natural way to think and speak about something, and that is deideologizing.

Thus, problematization contributes to transform negative or limiting situations, allowing people to become conscious about their possibilities, their rights, and their capacities for transformation but not in an immediate and direct way. Problematization liberates their possibilities for human, civic, and social action, while also widening their cognitive field. An illustration of this can be seen in the way this method has been used by community psychology research and action in order to collectively assess community needs (Montero, 2004), producing reflective decisions, while at the same time sensitizing the people about normative needs concerning health.

Some Problematizing Procedures

The procedures presented here are illustrative of what has been said, but they should not be considered as general modes of action to be canonically applied in a variety of situations. They are not recipes, they are just a way to show how the critical character of problematizing procedures can be put into action in a way that has been useful for certain specific situations. As already said, problematization has to be carried out as a function of a concrete situation, taking into account the particular conditions of each situation. These are conditions inherent to the critical character of this procedure, as dialog and participation also are, meaning that psychologists should be well informed about each concrete situation and carefully listen and observe the people they work with. They must keep a critical observation of them, reflecting about why and for whom they are doing this. A good way to do this is to keep a log or field notebook registering every step and intervention, reflections made both by the external and internal agents, and share those notes with the people one is working with, discussing them and the questions that may come out of those reflections.

Problematization needs participation as a base for action. The people involved in the process must be able to intervene with freedom, although respecting the same right in others. Everyone should have the opportunity to speak, everyone should be heard. All opinions should be noted or recorded and as is usual in group discussions, turns to speak should be respected. Criticism should be reasoned as it is important to create a reflexive climate where the topic discussed, situated in its

context, is analyzed by all the participants discussing its causes and consequences and its relation with their lives as well as with other interest and their sources of power in society; their resources and their needs. External agents should be careful to not impose their prestige (as practitioners, as scholars, or as members of funding institutions).

Some examples of problematization procedures are presented, analyzing their methodological aspects.

Analysis of Symbolic Representations of a Specific Problem

Sometimes there are particular circumstances where the negative effects must be understood in order to change the situation. It may be useful to ask the people affected to describe in symbolic form how they see the situation or how they would like it to be. That symbolic representation may take the form of individual productions such as drawings or writings (for example, a poem, an advertisement, a tale); or making comparisons between a current situation and different possibilities for that event.

There also could be collective productions such as collages produced by several people, accompanied with a verbal explanation of what they did and why they did it in that particular way. In these cases, the people participating in the collective task have to organize their work strategy, deciding what to do and how, selecting materials, and reaching accords about how, where, and why to use them. This procedure already is part of the critical discussion about the issue to be represented.

Representations of specific situations in everyday life with some of the participants as actors in a play, later discussed by the whole group also produce interesting discussion topics. These sociodramatic representations should be short, directly related to the issue critically discussed and they should feature the role playing dramatizing concrete situations lived by the participants.

These are projective situations, in which through “exercises” or “games,” drawings, and narratives, people express their feelings, their beliefs, their opinions, and general knowledge about an issue or a condition in their lives. As they produce concrete productions, they may be compared with later creations, and rediscussed, showing how perceptions and opinions about a particular issue have changed, and why.

What happens during the process of production of symbolic representations is as important as the discussion about them that follow. Questions to be posed during that discussion may arise from the relations and the mode of construction of those representations. During this type of activity there should be a careful distribution of the time to be spent in it, determining with the participants how much is going to be employed, and making a good distribution of it. There should be time to introduce the activity and to allow for the participants to introduce themselves and their expectations in case they do not know each other. This should be followed by a period for explaining what is to be done and the rules regarding that task, as well as clarifying any doubt that may surface and hear ideas and make decisions. There must be time to carry out the task; time for the group to explain what they did, and

why they did it in such a way, and finally, time to discuss and reflect about the task and the explanations, and to close the session.

Triggering a Problematization Process

This refers to ways of inducing the reflexive process of critical doubting that should happen both in group discussions and within its individual members. External agents or community leaders could use what could be called “triggering devices” for beliefs, representations, stereotypes, or images about a specific issue, problem, situation, institution, relation, or idea which are important for a community.

As triggering devices we can mention the forms used to symbolize a relationship or a circumstance or the community. That is, the symbols used to represent the community and organizations or circumstances related to it. The power of those symbols resides in their capacity to condense all the attributes that make up the totality of a whole object, therefore they allow to understand how that object is seen and felt.

Thence, close attention should be paid to words used to define a problem, a situation, expectation or community life circumstances, those words freely used during discussions, and thought-provoking words intentionally chosen. Also colors and images and other graphic elements used to describe an aspect or situation being discussed also can be a source for a problematizing reflection.

In my practice a specific “technique” has proved useful for the generation of problematizing processes: The use of “problematizing questions.” That is, the sort of question which cannot be answered by usually accepted explanations, whose origin and explanatory capacity are uncontested. These questions do not accept the commonplace answers, they probe, gently and incisively, once again insisting on why and how until there is silence. When habitual commonplaces cease, when nothing is to be said because usual explanations fail, reflection begins and some other reasons and answers begin to emerge. Perplexity arises when everyday accepted explanations are not useful and confrontation between different ways to understand a problem or a situation has to be addressed and sorted out in order to go ahead, to solve a problem or to take a decision. Inconsistencies are found and new aspects and new modes of interpreting the object of discussion and analysis begin to be proposed and tried; so uncritical acceptance of the knowledge previously received as the hegemonic way to understand certain aspects of our daily life begin to be doubted and may be rejected. It is in that way that it is said that consciousness is mobilized.

Although, problematizing questions are specific to each particular group situation and specific discussion, there cannot be something like a standard sort of question. As an illustration of what has been presented, I will describe a case in which two specific problematizing questions were used, and the process that followed during the discussion of the answers given by the group. In one project in a low-income community on the outskirts of Caracas, Venezuela, I was working with a group of women and men dissatisfied with the education their children were receiving

at the local public school. At the end of one of the meetings in which the mistreatment and deficiencies of the school were being discussed and a strategy to obtain a better service was being organized, the following questions were posed:

What did I learn today?

What did I teach today?

These questions were written on a piece of paper that left enough space for the people to write answers, but which was not very large because the people did not like to write long texts; some of them felt intimidated by writing tasks and in general, they have not the habit of writing, although all knew how to do it. They had about 6–8 min to give their answers. The first question they found very easy to answer. They knew quite well what they had learnt at that particular session, and many referred to specific items of the discussion and information exchanged during it. But, the second question caused much perplexity. Some of them said that they had nothing to teach, in spite of having actively contributed to the previous discussion and having given useful ideas for the actions to be carried out. Some even said they could not teach, because they hardly had formal education (referring to the little schooling they had). In the ensuing discussion another question was posed, this time confronting that sort of response with what other people had said they had received. Other participants would say what they had learnt from those who thought they had nothing to teach. The reflections centered on the coexistence and usefulness of several types of knowledge, and how they complement each other. It emphasized the capacity of every person to draw knowledge out of their experiences that can be shared, contributing thus to the community wellbeing. A general conclusion was that they should pay attention to what others were saying regardless of their scholar or popular wisdom status, and that being poor was not equivalent to being unable to think.

These questions, by inducing the problematizing process, aim to obtain conscientization. They are part of the process of mobilization of consciousness leading to liberate. A liberation that is not generalized and undefined but specific to the situation. It should always be taken into account that liberation is not a one-act performance, it is a process.

Those questions have a critical and free condition expressed in the fact that they have not a specific structure to be followed. There are not standard problematizing questions. Such a thing would be absurd because it would suppose that problems are similar across cultures, time, societies, and places. Poverty is a calamity extended across the world, but the ways to naturalize, explain, and even adapt to it, also vary across the world. That is why it is in dialog where the problematizing agents can catch the particular mode of expression where they can insert the question.

Problematizing questions may be posed within dialog, at any moment. They do not have a fixed moment, they should seize the opportunity when verbal or action discourses show the presence of ideas that maintain privileges, oppression, and exclusion and present oppressive power relationships as natural. But if they are idiosyncratic, there are some aspects, deriving from their critical character that should be observed by the problematizing agents when posing them.

These agents should confront the person answering, and the group participating in the discussion, with the knowledge so far received and applied to the understanding of

the particular topic being discussed. It is as if each person begins to question herself/himself about why what she/he knows is not enough to answer the question posed. What is the origin of what I know? For what is it useful? For whom is it useful? Trying to find an explanation for these questions unchains a process that should lead to the verification of the inadequacy of what one knows for answering the problematizing question.

Problematizing questions are not contentious. This means that they do not attack by disqualifying what has been said. It could be posed from the surprise or astonishment of what was said, or from the contrast with what is in the immediate context where the opinion or explanation had been produced. Working with children also in a slum in Caracas, I found that in a program where they had the freedom to draw and color something related to their “barrio” (neighborhood), they uniformly repeated the drawing of a house with red pitched roof in a garden with a tree full of apples. There are no apple trees in Venezuela, there are no gardens in the slum, where no house has a red tile pitched roof. Instead of saying that those houses did not exist in their neighborhood, the question was: Those are interesting houses, are they around here? The children began saying in a doubtful way: “Hmm ... yes...,” and some said: “That is the way houses are.” The agent’s answer was: “Mine is not like that, let us go to the window and see if we can see them around here.” Silence ensued, and then a child said: “There are no houses like that around here, that is the way they teach us to paint them at school,” and another one said; “and they are in television too.” A short reflective discussion ensued, and after that they began drawing in a different, more creative way. Later, discussing how to transform their environment in the future, and how they would do that, they drew from the present, but transformed it in a place full of color, with a wide paved street, houses decorated with light bulbs (they choose Christmas time in 2015); big Christmas trees where every child would receive presents from the Child Jesus; a square with the statue of the woman who directed the constructions of stairs and pathways when the neighborhood had been constructed; a nursery and... a barrier with a guard regulating the entry. This last feature copied the practice of high income neighborhoods in the city. This was also discussed, but it is another story.

Therefore, the problematizing question does not assume the naturalized explanation as a point of discussion and confrontation, but as a point of inquiry and verification. In that sense it is persistent and insistent, it does not accept naturalized answers; it is nonconformist. The question tries to generate reflection in the interlocutors, contrasting opinions in such a way that they have to think about the contrasts and find by themselves, new explanations while submitting their previous answers to critique. This approach, developed within community psychology work, when adopted with a liberating intention seeks then that the mobilization of consciousness leads to transforming actions.

Discussion–Reflection Meeting

Group dynamics and social psychology have provided abundant information about what to do whenever one needs to work with groups. It is common psychosocial lore that in every group meeting one has an introduction in order to get people to

greet each other or to know who is who, and then the topic to be discussed and the rules organizing the meeting are presented, taking into account the time the meeting will take.

The rules guaranteeing full participation and respect for all participants are to be observed. They should know why and how to observe them. Lack of organization will arrest participation, decisions and discussions, boycotting the goals of the meetings, and discouraging people. A rigid and authoritarian structure will inform, but block participation again. In these meetings, aspects related to the objectives to be reached should be respected. Actually those meetings should be planned along with the participants, who can thus begin reflecting about the topic to be discussed. The objectives should be clearly defined, because something to be avoided is to mobilize people just to have a more or less nice chat.

Facilitators should not monopolize the discourse. They should allow opportunities to speak to every participant and never impose their viewpoints, although they have the right to present them. Both the participants and the external or internal agents facilitating discussions should depart from the notion that all people have opinions, that knowledge can be of different kinds and is present in all people, and that everyone have feelings. All that will be part of the process of consciousness mobilization that is to be started by the problematizing process. But this process is both collective and individual. The diversity of opinions produced about a certain topic can be enriched by that diversity, but the problematization happens within every participant, and is neither uniform nor univocal confirming that every individual process is social and every social process is made up of individual contributions. A discussion–reflection meeting should be democratic, yet very well organized; easygoing yet productive. A meeting without conclusions, where nothing is clear or where the agenda was not covered will give the participants a sense of futility and even irritate them, inducing lack of interest.

The facilitator's questions and observations or information should be made only when pertinent to what is being discussed. And, of course, they should not repeat or paraphrase what is being said. That can be bothersome. But they also should control the verbosity of people who tend to take too long, and foster the participation of the shy. They should understand that questions, specially problematizing ones are placed to induce denaturalizing and deideologizing reflection.

It is important to understand that sometimes a topic, due to its relation to a problematic aspect, or to expectations linked to community needs, will not be dealt with in just one session. It may take much longer, sometimes needing different forms of approach and a lot of patience.

Conclusion

It is not easy to write about methods that, although strictly following the order characterizing any methodological task, do not establish specific rules to be followed. That means that we are not dealing with techniques. And it is something

which should be easily understood when talking about liberation, but not so easily put into practice. These methods do have rules but they are not of the kind to fill handbooks or practice manuals. They also have certain shared characteristics: *They are dialogical*. They happen through conversations in which two or more people exchange ideas, discussing them, rejecting some or every one of them, and producing new ones. That means *they are participatory*. It is impossible to produce liberation in a one-sided way, like it is impossible to have a conversation where only one person talks. *They happen within processes*. They do not produce magic episodes where things suddenly change. They cannot be carried out in a sole performance. They cook slowly and *each process has its own timing*, so we cannot say that liberation will be produced in a fixed number of sessions. They are at the same time *collective and individual*, for as a group moves forward in the search of a certain liberating goal, at the same time but with different rhythm, unique for each member, the participants process their own individual changes toward liberation. *They also are historical*. These methods search to include a biographical perspective and in that sense they need to explore memories and to advance visions of the future, so they can build on reality as it has been constructed by each group and each person of that group, and on the possibilities that guide action toward liberation from the conditions of that reality. *They have a holistic phenomenological perspective*. They try to understand each situation as a whole, seeing it in its context, situating it in time and space. And although they are linked to specific situations, having thus a concrete base, at the same time *they use as the main ground for action, each person's thoughts*. Michel Foucault (1984) said that to think is to change the meaning of thoughts, for he considered problematization as a method for thought. We can say that *these methods both move thoughts and actions*, the latter providing the circumstantial framework for the mobilization of consciousness. *They also are critical*. As discussion and reflection within dialogs are happening, a process of evaluation provides the opportunity to find out the origin and causes, as well as the consequences of certain events.

The methods presented here do not pretend to have covered the methodological panorama in the psychology of liberation. Another characteristic already insinuated at the beginning of these conclusions, is that according with the conditions mentioned, each researcher, with her/his participants will have to create the ways or modes of liberating. Therefore, responding to culture and to the specific conditions of each group and situation is necessary. In some places, such as some Venezuelan rural areas, women would only respond and talk to other women; they would not be the ones raising their voices and be first in line. But nothing would be carried out if they did not agree with what was going on. They had a kind of power that they used in an invisible way (Briceño-Leon, 1990). In some Bolivian rural areas, people would not answer questions, but they would willingly respond to puppets representing the same situations they wanted to change (Vio Grossi, 1981). Children easily respond to pictures or drawings, or to stories read and discussed, so through the metaphors they begin to critically relate to the situation to be discussed. Telling about an unfinished situation or presenting it as a comic strip and asking the people to provide the end, or asking questions about possible conclusions may raise lively

discussions among some groups. But these triggering devices are not recipes to be mechanically applied. They provide an opening to hear what people say, observing without preconceptions about them; talking and keeping both eyes and ears open can provide the useful and adequate ideas and questions and the modes of implementing them. Research for liberation needs creativity in order to be effective.

Acknowledgment The author thanks Christopher Sonn and Dan Christie for reading and commenting this chapter.

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