



## PSYCHOLOGY'S INACTION: LATINA/O PSYCHOLOGY'S CALL TO ACTION

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INVITED ARTICLE

*"The fight is never about grapes or lettuce.  
It is always about people."  
- Cesar Chavez (n.d., para. 1)*

I am thankful to the National Latina/o Psychological Association (NLPA), Dr. Hector Y. Adames, and Dr. Nayeli Y. Chavez-Deñias for the invitation to contribute to *Latina/o Psychology Today* (LPT). I have chosen to take a broad perspective in my thoughts around social justice, over a more specific approach that addresses any one aspect of my work. I have also chosen to focus primarily on issues facing Latina/o communities nationally over international perspectives, which are equally important and often times missing from our discourse. Given the brevity of this article, I needed to focus my thoughts on current challenges facing U.S. based Latina/o psychologists and our communities. In the end, I hope that I have not come across as an ungrateful invited guest to someone's house. The very nature of my article and thoughts are a form of social justice in and of themselves. It is within this context that I will share my perspectives on what should be foundational to

everything we do. I am also thankful to our leadership in planning a conference on the theme of social justice. It is timely. Finally, let me say that I write these sentiments as much to myself as to anyone else who may read this.

### THE PERSONAL, POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL

*"To change the world we must be good  
to those who cannot repay us.  
"- Pope Francis (2014, para. 1)*

Some psychologists and students continue to ask me why I, and others, am still talking so much about multicultural and social justice? I wonder what world these folks exist in? I am reminded of our colleague, Aldarondo (2007), who states that for too long we have kept our work as psychologists safely neutral and shielded from the realities of the world around us. I am concerned that we still promote a mentality and professional identity in our current training models that cultivates an oppressive mindset and invalidates multicultural and social justice tenets, thereby invalidating and oppressing the very nature of who they, and we, are. While many students in training from Latina/o communities understand the realities of living in the United States today, graduate training systems seem to believe that if they adhere to narrowly defined APA standards, we are matching our training model with the real-world issues facing Latina/o communities. What is our role in effecting change on this level? In reading our (NLPA's) Mission statement and objectives, there has always been something missing for me.

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While I appreciate the role our association plays in creating a supportive environment where our work can be disseminated and validated, which is also a form of social justice, I am concerned that our objectives are missing direct statements about ameliorating the atrocities happening to Latina/o communities “outside” our silos. Social justice work is a both/and. We need a place to take care of ourselves in order to be situated to take care of others. The work is tiring and to not have the support of our Latina/o familia leaves us burned out and working in solitude, which will only take us so far. It is together where our strength lies. I believe our task, as Latina/o psychologists, and as an organization, is to disrupt and effect change in unjust, unfair, and unequal systems, both in our local communities (e.g., universities, community mental health centers, research on the local level), and in the larger society (e.g., political landscape, undemocratic rhetoric) as well. Social justice is synonymous with political and I believe it is our responsibility as Latina/o psychologists to challenge the inequalities in our society, while working collaboratively with others. We need to set the standard, not wait for some other entity to do it for us.

### **RUNNING FROM OURSELVES WHILE MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO**

*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness;  
only light can do that.”*

*- Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967, p. 176)*

When I hear comments from political candidates calling Mexicans “Rapists” and building walls, I can’t help but think that we, as an association, have a role to play in addressing these issues, nationally. Psychology, more broadly, has a role to play in addressing these issues. Social issues are at the heart of what is impacting Latina/o communities today. Talking about, writing about, and teaching about multicultural competence, responsiveness, attunement, congruence, whatever we want to call it, is simply not enough. When psychologists tell me that our involvement in “social issues” is not our place, I become worried. My greatest concern is that we have been, and are still, fighting to ensure that multicultural issues are integrated throughout our curriculums and in all the work that psychologists do, for far too long, with only superficial changes occurring. How many programs in psychology truly reflect the social realities of the very communities

they want their students to serve? Some, but not near enough. What is true is that training models want their students to work with the most disenfranchised in society, in order for their programs to meet numbers and retain their accreditation through accrediting bodies that perpetuate an incongruence between who we are as people and what we should do as professionals. There is a pressing need to deliver services to unserved Latina/o communities who are culturally and linguistically isolated, yet we are training our students to work with the “worried well.” This is an injustice. We have a role to play in this process.

While we have achieved much in the year 2016, I remain as gravely concerned about the state of our nation today, as much as when I read about the lynching of Blacks through the early 1900s or about “Operation Wetback” in the 1950s in the United States, neither of which occurred that long ago in our history. Unfortunately, there are still modern, metaphoric lynchings happening to a number of devalued communities, and actions to deport as many Latina/os as possible. Our voices are being silenced by the policies and practices that purport to being fair and just, but operate under the guise of “New Racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). We have moved away from public, physical lynchings, and overt forms of racism (Operation Wetback) to intellectually and politically rationalized lynchings by people who claim that they are not racist (Neville, Gallardo, & Sue, 2015), sexist, homophobic, classist, etc. As we talk about social justice, where does this fall and how long is it going to take us, as a profession, to effect change? This is my concern...and it should be our concern as well.

### **PSYCHOLOGY’S INACTION**

*“Even in the face of powerful structures of domination, it remains possible for each of us, especially those of us who are members of oppressed and/or exploited groups as well as those radical visionaries who may have race, class, and sex privilege, to define and determine alternative standards, to decide on the nature and extent of compromise.” - bell hooks (2015, p. 81)*

Whose responsibility is it to address these social issues and the impact they have on Latina/o communities? I believe it is ours. If not us, then who? The APA is not going to get there without us,

yet the APA continues to believe they have all the knowledge and resources they need to do what is best for *ALL*, while still remaining insular in their policies, processes, and outcomes. A good example of an injustice is the continued organizational stratification of the four ethnic associations within APA's Council of Representatives. I am reminded of the parable of the Big White dog on the porch throwing morsels of bread to the black, brown and yellow dogs on the other side of the fence. The black, brown, and yellow dogs are fighting with one another over the morsels of bread, while the Big White dog on the porch enjoys a full loaf of bread, while being voyeuristic as the status quo and power structure remains intact. Morsels of bread are simply not enough. Sitting at the table, with no vote and only being allowed to speak when called upon, is oppressive. If we are going to address social justice issues, we need to set the standard for setting policies and practices that reflect our communities' needs and not simply adapt and adjust according to the already existing infrastructures in place – narrowly defined training models, placing economic interests over the interests of people, and justifying oppressive practices in the face of attempting to meet external standards that are more concerned with leaving the status quo intact. For those who believe they are not political, maintaining the status quo is political. There is much for mainstream psychology to learn from our cultures and communities, yet I am concerned that we are still attempting to meet a standard that is inconsistent with whom we are, thereby restricting our capacity at times to truly meet the needs of our communities across research, education and practice domains. At times, we run the risk of further dehumanizing our Latina/o communities.

### LATINA/O PSYCHOLOGY'S CALL TO ACTION

*"You see, you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged petals. On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity. We would all love its will to reach the sun. Well, we are the roses. This is the concrete. These are my damaged petals. Don't ask me why...Ask me how."*  
- Tupac Shakur (n.d., para 5)

Comas-Diaz (2006) states, "I use the term Latino ethnic psychology to designate the application of cultural traditions and practices into healing and liberation...and attempts to restore connectedness,

foster liberation, and facilitate ethnic identity reformulation" (p. 440). The terms connectedness and liberation are critical concepts that are consistently subjugated by oppressive policies and practices, yet the restoring of connectedness to ourselves and to others is what we lack. What if we always saw ourselves in others? What if what happened to someone else also impacted us deeply? What if I only saw the beauty and strength in those around me, regardless of who they are or where they come from? My definition of social justice- it starts with people and our ability to always recognize ourselves in others. People matter. Our current vernacular is too theoretical and conceptual. The more theoretical and conceptual we get, the further away from people we get and the harder it is to apply these theoretical concepts in action. The more detached we are, the easier it is to dehumanize people and rationalize unjust practices. Our Latina/o communities are suffering too much, and yet the discipline of psychology, more broadly, continues to perpetuate self-protection and self-interests over serving those most in need, while stifling creativity and flexibility in our practices, regardless of what domain we may find ourselves. Carlson (2013) states, our new charge must be to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" (p. 284). I reflect on how much I am doing towards this end and I ask that you do also, and that *WE* also ask ourselves these same questions.

Pope Francis recently said while visiting the United States that we needed to think about building bridges, not walls. I agree. There is a balance. We need to work with others, but we also need not continue to tolerate injustice. A recent example in Arizona illustrates this. In 2015, the Arizona Education Department stated that reciting the poem, *In Lak'ech*, a poem penned by Chicano playwright, Luis Valdes, and one that I have used elsewhere (Gallardo, 2013), was "illegally promoting ethnic solidarity and the overthrow of the U.S. government by teaching Mexican history and hip hop" (Planas, 2015). The Arizona Education Department found that those students, who participated in the Ethnic studies curriculum that was also banned back in 2010, had higher scores on state tests and higher graduation rates. Remind me again what the issue is with this? Fear. Fear is powerful and it gives people permission to engage in behaviors and make decisions that are misguided and uneducated. This is an injustice. Arizona officials have stated that the ethnic specific curriculum and poems like *In*

*Lak'ech* are promoting hatred of Whites. Is it the education system or those in power who run the education systems that promote hatred of Whites? It is decisions like these and political commentary like Trump's that promotes hatred, while giving people permission to do the same. The very essence of our Latina/o communities centers on connectedness, relationships, yet our mainstream colleagues/society become fearful when we "collect" or gather. Maybe mainstream society can learn something from our cultural values. What an ethnic specific curriculum does is validate one's lived experiences, which empowers people to take control over their lives, not try to control others. Where in psychology are our lived realities reflected in the curriculum or in theories we teach about, the interventions we implement and in our research practices? Many of us are doing this work, but if you are like me, I find myself constantly battling between remaining true to my moral compass, while the systems where I find myself continue to want me to compromise this compass. This is where our support of one another is simply priceless, but we need to do more, and we can. Too many people are suffering as a result of the oftentimes lack of congruency between what our degrees define as acceptable practices and what people really need. There is suffering in our Latina/o communities. I am reminded of this every morning when I drive through Orange County, CA and I see the fields where our communities are picking strawberries right next to the running/walking path that is designated for the upper-middle class community and the newly developed housing neighborhoods where homes run in the \$500,000 and above. What is our responsibility in further addressing these two juxtaposed realities? I am left questioning if I am doing enough. What is my role in ameliorating these moral and ethical dilemmas? Lets starts by measuring outcomes by individual lives, families, their stories, their narratives and not just look at numbers. At times, numbers remove us from the reality of seeing what is going on with the people, our people. While numbers matter, there is more to our story.

If you are a human being, you are political. If you are a psychologist, you are human and therefore, you are political. In all that we do, we need to carry our degrees in one hand, and the most recent news issue in the other. It is impossible to avoid seeing all the injustices surrounding us. Are we doing enough? Should we even be involved in

"social issues?" Does our work as psychologists include being justice oriented? These are questions that I am often asked, or more aptly, challenged on when I present or do work out in the community. Prilleltensky, Docecki, Frieden, and Wang (2007) would argue that "wellness cannot flourish in the absence of justice, and justice is devoid of meaning in the absence of wellness" (p. 19). If we embrace this perspective, then we have to begin to wonder how much we are doing. As Latina/o psychologists and students-in-training, let us not be seduced by the smoke and mirrors that we are doing justice work when many times we may be perpetuating injustice. Jiménez-Domínguez (2009) states, "Objectivity must not be confused with impartiality. One cannot be impartial in the face of injustice" (p. 39). We can do this work "ethically" and we should. The real "ethical dilemma" is whether or not we, as Latina/o psychologists and students in training, continue to implement policies and practices with the knowledge that these very same policies and practices might be limited in their capacity to create social change. Doherty (2013) states that the task of mental health providers is to be citizen-therapists. We can take it a step-further and say that we need to remain centered on who we are as a community, and be citizen-Latina/o psychologists in all that we do. After all, it is who we are. In *Lak'ech*, I am you and you are my other me.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

*"The greatest humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves..."*  
- Paulo Freire (1970, p. 44)

Rappaport (1995) states that mainstream cultural narratives are stories that are told repeatedly through social institutions such as the media and systems of education. Ultimately, these narratives become learned by all members of a society (majority and minority) and are internalized to such an extent that they become "reality" for all of us if we allow it. Latina/o cultural and community narratives that tell stories of the strengths of Latina/o communities must often be taught through alternative and intragroup socialization agents (i.e., ethnic socialization, child-rearing practices, ethnic-specific organizations). Unfortunately, our stories are not told through mainstream socialization agents and are often not accessible as socialization messages outside of ethnic specific cultures and communities

(Harrell & Gallardo, 2008). This needs to change. The larger society needs us to transcend our silos to better the world. Let us not be stifled by the mainstream message that our values are secondary to the dominant narrative. Social justice is a necessary condition for optimal personal, relational, and collective wellbeing (Prilleltensky, 2003). When I see my Muslim colleagues and students feeling fearful of being accused of being a terrorist that should also be my concern. Or, when laws are being passed that further oppress my gay and lesbian colleagues and the clients I serve that is my concern. Justice. *Justicia*. What does this mean? It means that we must always recognize ourselves in others, regardless of who it might be.

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## #NLPA2016 Biennial Conference Theme:

