

A PERSPECTIVE FROM UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

UNA PERSPECTIVA DESDE ESTADOS UNIDOS DE AMÉRICA

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A COMMENTARY ON / UN COMENTARIO SOBRE

Calviño Valdés-Faully, M. (2016). Hacer Psicología con Cuba: Época de Cambios en Cambio de Época. *Revista Puertorriqueña de Psicología*, 27(2), 208-228.

For professionals in the U.S., the ability to engage with Cuba and Cubans is new and unexpected. For more than 50 years, this island of over 11 million inhabitants, only 90 miles from Florida's southern coast, has largely remained a mystery to most in the U.S., known through heavily propaganda-laden news accounts, reports from tourists who travelled through third-party countries, or Cuban expatriates. At the same time, the reputation of the Cuban approach to health has provided an important example of how community based, integrated primary care can be a strong contributor to population well-being. So, it is no surprise that the "opening" of travel to Cuba from the U.S. government and increased opportunities for U.S. citizens to visit with and meet Cuban colleagues have been seen as important events to many U.S. health professionals, including psychologists.

The exposition by Professor Calviño, *Doing Psychology with Cuba: Times of Change in Changing Times*, should be required reading for any U.S. psychologist wishing to visit Cuba for the purposes of

collaboration or exchange, wishing to understand how psychologists in Cuba understand their own history and profession, or wondering what recent political and economic changes might mean for Cuban society or Cuban psychology.

In his closing sections, Professor Calviño strikes an important cautionary tone – that engagement with the U.S. will require both openness and caution "We want respectful collaboration; We want open exchanges at all levels; We want constructive, proactive dialogues. But above all, we want to be consistent with our aspirations ... Whoever wants to get up with Cuba will have our friendly hand, the one we are extending together for the construction of Cuba that has always been a Project, because it exists unequivocally in the desire to make it ever more Cuba Let psychology be our way of being participants, active builders of our Cuba."

Professor Calviño's call for collaboration in the interests of Cuba and Cuban society is compatible with calls for developing a world psychology that is "glocal" – a psychology that engages internationally but that is framed and attuned to local needs, and that moves beyond the historical hegemony of

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U.S. or North American psychology. Yet Calviño's invitation is also unique because the U.S. was cut off from Cuban psychology not by distance or by level of development of psychology, but by politics and ideology. In the new rapprochement between Cuba and the U.S., and the new opportunities for collaboration and exchange, there is a possibility for thinking through a different kind of collaboration with U.S. psychologists – one that emphasizes mutual learning in a “learning partner” model. But to explore what that might mean, it is important to recall the historical perspective presented in Professor Calviño's article.

What does Professor Calviño say?

To begin, Professor Calviño reminds us that the development of psychology in Cuba took place in a specific historical and cultural milieu focused on a revolutionary project of transforming the country. As he notes, Cuban psychology came of age as part of a social project, deeply rooted in social justice concerns, “to create a society with fewer inequalities, fewer citizens without shelter, fewer children without schools, fewer sick without hospitals, more teachers, and more doctors per inhabitant than any other country in the world.” Thus, Cuban psychology is essentially perceived as an applied discipline, embedded in a political agenda, with a focus on wellbeing. This framing of the discipline was, as Calviño notes, shared across other countries in the region: psychology was also framed as instrumental in struggles for autonomy, independence, and self-determination across neighboring countries in Latin America. As Calviño notes “we did it with those who offered a helping hand and without those who never gave the slightest nod toward collaboration ... we did it with those who allowed access to their training and research centers. We did it with those with whom we had similar perspectives, similar intentions, similar concepts and without those who, as we saw it, distanced psychology from needs and identities.”

Cuba's experiences during the worldwide collapse of the Soviet Union, subsequent political and economic changes, and the role of the U.S. in imposing and maintaining an embargo (blockade) are important to understand as well. Prior to the 1990's Cuba was largely dependent on the Soviet Union for the import of raw materials, energy and some exports. When the Soviet Union collapsed at the beginning of the 1990's, collateral effects were felt worldwide, including in Cuba. The demise of the Soviet Union and subsequent world economic slump resulted in Cuba in drastic and severe shortages, exacerbated by an embargo by the U.S. (but extending more broadly) of goods and economic interaction. Between 1990 and 1993, the Cuban economy was in shambles, resulting in economic hardship, hunger, and major public health challenges. One effect of this period and the subsequent years, Calviño notes, was that an earlier ethos of socio-economic equality shifted with attempts to stimulate the economy: for example, income disparity increased (from a 4x difference between the lowest and highest 20% to a 15x difference); and a new class of economic life, separated from work, developed from the “remittances” that Cubans received from relatives abroad. As Professor Calviño describes it, this separated work and income, and altered conditions underlying the socialist ideal.

At the end of the 1990's, the situation changed again as Cuba developed a small but present business sector, including foreign investments. As Professor Calviño writes, “new subjectivities” emerged, as economic roles branched to include managers and entrepreneurs. Since then, continuing to the present day, Cuba is experiencing a watershed transformation that brings, as Professor Calviño notes, a dilemma of how to maintain the ideal of building a “prosperous and sustainable socialism” in a more open, market oriented society. In a sense this requires rethinking the relations among the individual, family, and society and confronting, as Calviño puts it, “individual

capacities placed in double play: the good of all contextualized in different levels of the good of some.” His example of the effects of implementing tax laws provides a clear example of these changing relationships: “I think it is convenient to point out that the process of implementation of the tax laws, for a population that was practically unaware of such issues, brings not only the inclusion of a new practical dimension, but also, by placing the subject as a taxpayer, institutes it as a claimant. The subject receiving benefits from the State, associated with work, now “pays” (tax) for the possibility of some of these benefits, and therefore their demand for them is modified.

What are the psychological implications of these changes? What roles did psychology have throughout the decades and what is its current role? My understanding of Professor Calviño’s historical descriptions and current recommendations are that psychology in Cuba has consistently been a part of, and product of the socio-political-economic context of the country (as indeed it is everywhere), and that he is concerned that the current changes in Cuba require explicit attention to psychology’s catalyzing role. There are a number of challenges Professor Calviño raises: how will Cuba reconcile the incentives of a more market-oriented economy with social justice? What role will psychology play in adapting to the changing context, and in remaining committed to serving local needs. Calviño calls for what he calls a “re-dedication” of psychology to the social aims that were part of its genesis in Cuba. He specifies two over-arching tasks: (1) a commitment of psychology to social justice; (2) development of a culture in psychology of critical reflection with a focus on local (which he defines as Latin American) realities. He then addresses a number of specific areas focused on developing self-directed, “empowered”, thoughtful citizens who are prepared to be entrepreneurs and consumers, yet committed to public welfare.

These are broad and noble ambitions. My struggle in reading them is understanding how these overarching goals translate into the everyday world of education and practice of psychology in Cuba today. My understanding of psychology in Cuba is of course limited, and informed primarily by visits to Cuban institutions in the capital city and attendance at two conferences – one general, and one focused on health psychology. But my understanding is that Cuban psychologists, by and large, work within the public sector, primarily the health care system (but also education), as an integral part of mental and behavioral health approaches. Although Professor Calviño’s essay does not touch on the details of curricula and training goals, this will be where the broad ambitions of a psychology attuned to social realities, Cuban identity and Latin American aspirations will need to find expression. It would be instructive to understand how the broad conceptual goals Professor Calviño outlines would find translation into the education and practice of psychologists.

Interactions with the U.S.

Professor Calviño also addresses an issue gaining importance as interactions with the US become more commonplace: how are Cuban psychologists to interact with US psychologists? His answer notes the complexity in this question, and the challenges in building collaborations that do not conflate finances with authority, and that keep priorities important to Cuban needs. It might be worth noting that this same discussion is taking place broadly as psychology has grown and become established as a vibrant discipline in almost every country in the world. The growth of regional organizations focused on defining and articulating local needs and the adaptation of psychological models and practices to local contexts, and the recognition that the psychological literature is non-representative and the ensuing discussions of developing models of culture

and context are among the most exciting topics in psychology today – these are not uniquely Cuban challenges, although they may be most salient at this time of rapid change.

Let me specifically address Professor Calviño's cautions about interactions with U.S. colleagues. There is value in thinking deeply about how increased collaboration and exchange will go. There are some realities that Calviño addresses that cannot be denied – there are and will be for some time large economic differences between Cuba and the U.S. – and these differences add to the complexity of developing equitable collaborations when funding resources are not equal. Of course, this issue is not unique to Cuba – it pertains to any collaborations with unequal funding, and requires open dialogue and negotiation to avoid a colonizing or colonized relation (see REFS for broad discussion on this topic).

There are also historical differences in approach and epistemology that need to be broached – most U.S. psychologists are not familiar with the perspectives from Soviet and Russian psychology that inform not only Cuban but many other psychologies, and are not familiar with the giants of liberation psychology; conversely, there are current trends in U.S. psychology that are not salient elsewhere. Again, it is important to engage in a fair amount of mutual education, or at least to anticipate that collaborations need to explore expectations and base perspectives as well as collaborative processes.

There are also some strengths of Cuban psychology that Calviño does not address that may help inform the conversation – how has the content of Cuban psychology evolved as a result of its strong social justice orientation? How has training evolved? What are the strengths of the Cuban educational model that requires hands-on experience before entering graduate programs; that emphasizes health settings; and that eschews private practice? How have

research topics been selected within the Cuban system? Dialogue between Cuban and U.S. colleagues has just begun – and it might be an opportune time to promote educational exchanges to understand the current state these questions.

Local and Global

Calviño's answer to the "glocal" issue is to focus on regional and national priorities. Some might find this position of developing a psychology of Cuba, for Cuba and in Cuba as too inward looking and insular. As Professor Calviño notes "Latin American psychology must decentralize its attention to itself, ignore its scientific and social status and propose an effective service to the needs of the popular majorities. They are the real problems of the peoples themselves, not the problems that concern other latitudes, which must be the primary object of their work." It is worth a discussion about whether this is effective, or even possible, and about what is missed by not striving to be part of a larger, worldwide discussion. Is it true that the problems of Cuba or Latin America are "not the problems of other latitudes"? Issues such as stigma, prejudice, hierarchies, disparities, and striving for social justice seem more universal – at least they are on the table in every country – and world-wide discussion can offer new ways of approaching these common issues. As psychology continues to grow, to develop robust programs, literature and models that explicitly pay attention to adaptability and local relevance, these will be the important discussions we need to have. Cuba will have much to offer in this conversation.

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