Liberation Psychology

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Review of Article:

An Overview of Liberation Psychology: Article Summary

Bridging the personal and the political: Practices for a liberation psychology, by Geraldine Moane (2003) is a very comprehensive article discussing liberation psychology. Moane’s article breaks down the development of liberations psychology in three ways. First Moane offers a social analysis that sets up the social conditions necessary for an oppressed society. Secondly, she identifies some of the psychological patterns associated with internalized oppression. Thirdly, Moane explains in further detail the processes involved in changing oppressive psychological and social patterns.

Moane utilizes the current situation in Northern Ireland to express how liberation psychology works and how oppression needs to be tackled at three levels. The three levels of change discussed that are deemed necessary for liberation from oppression are as follows: the micro level (the individual, and day to day settings), the meso level (the community, and organizations), and the macro level (the societal structure, and ideology).

In order for change to occur Moane argues that liberation psychology focuses on oppression at the structural level as well as at the individual levels. The causes of
oppression lie in the political, economic, and cultural ideologies that underlie oppressive social conditions. Moane states that “these structures and ideologies create the everyday experiences of violence, poverty, stress, discrimination, and prejudice that are manifestations of oppression. Liberation will therefore ultimately involve transformation of oppressive social structures, which can only occur through collective action.”

Unfortunately oppressive societies do not foster environments friendly to collective actions. Due to the violent, impoverished, stressful, and prejudiced nature of oppression it is difficult to begin collective actions to liberate individuals in these settings. Liberation psychology attempts to address this problem in a way that previous attempts made by community psychology have lacked. Community psychology has previously been involved in issues of oppression and liberation, however the difference between community psychology and liberation psychology can be seen in systemic features of change. Community psychology focuses on a more micro level; organizing change through an individual level, whereas liberation psychology attempts to deal with oppression not only at the micro level, but at the macro level as well (i.e. political and structural change).

As can be seen the identification of oppressive patterns at the macro level is imperative in the understanding of the social bases that creates oppressive societies. Moane argues that what is imperative for liberation psychology to work is an understanding of the social context(s) that have created oppression. Once this is clear psychologist will more readily be able to move between the macro and micro levels. Moane’s article identified six patterns at the macro level that were thought to be relevant from a liberation psychology perspective. They are: “violence; political exclusion;
economic exploitation; control of sexuality; cultural control and fragmentation.” Anyone of these six patterns taking place is a vast obstacle that needs to be addressed for positive change to occur.

If you consider all six patterns at work in a single society one can imagine the societal pressures that help enforce oppression. It can then be seen that these societal patterns can cause psychological problems for individuals living in these conditions. These potential psychological problems which can develop out of oppressed societies create problems not just at the individual level, but can also affect the ability to organize together as a people and fight oppression.

It is not only that these structural barriers are in place in oppressive society that creates problems, but the fact that these social and structural barriers create psychological problems at the individual level that effects the collective effort for change as well. Restrictions, tensions, and ambivalence have been frequently documented as patterns associated with oppression. They can be seen in areas such as sexuality, religion, and creativity. If you combine these restrictions with a common theme of low self-esteem, lack of self-worth, and self-doubt found in many individuals who reside in oppressed nation it is clear that psychological difficulties may arise. Oppression is also associated with fear, hopelessness, anger, and shame. With all of these patterns occurring it is often the case that individuals have difficulties in relationships due to misplaced anger, a lack of trust, and the constant feeling of competition.

All of these psychological patterns that can be created in oppressed societies affect its inhabitants. Growing up in oppressed areas has different effects on each member of that society; however it is clear that many negative psychological schemas
can develop in such a society. Moane argues that individuals who grow up in areas of oppression like Northern Ireland have more difficulties with self-esteem, assertiveness, and trust. Psychological patterns need to be countered if any positive change is going to be made in the fight against oppression. The argument is that in order to develop cohesive organization to address the structural oppression facing individuals there needs to be a sense of trust and cohesiveness. Individuals with low self-esteem, and assertiveness deficits are not going to be successful at organizing structural change.

Oppressive societies do however have a tendency to evoke some necessary positive attributes in inhabitants that can be drawn upon in efforts to seek equality and change. Generosity, courage, perseverance, and solidarity that develop in oppressive conditions, and particularly out of resistance to oppression are important attributes that need to be used in attempts to change oppressive conditions. Moane writes, “Transformation of internalized oppression thus involves not just diminishing negative patterns (self-confidence and self-esteem) but also building on strengths (generosity, courage, perseverance, and solidarity).”

It is important to note that successful change at the sociopolitical level will not even begin to emerge until individuals and groups have come together as a group with available resources, skills, and experiences. In order for interventions to be successful Moane argues that liberation psychologist need to have an understanding of the psychological patterns at work which were discussed above. Once this understanding is achieved changed needs to take place in all three levels of society. At the micro level the goal is to transform the negative self image and sense of inferiority that has been developed do to the oppressive societal constraints. At the meso level the intervention is
to overcome the feeling of isolation, and develop a sense of solidarity that is difficult to do in an oppressive nation. At the macro level the task is to discard the sense of alienation and helplessness associated with oppression and develop a sense of team with the ability to take action against societal pressures.

Although the micro, meso, and macro levels are described separately above, Moane argues that they are intertwined and a change in one can create a change in the others. For example by building personal strengths and assertiveness training one would increase the possibility of joining a group. By joining that group the individual would gain a sense of solidarity, which in turn would increase the likelihood of that individual taking action. Looking at it in the other direction, one could argue that taking action would create more self confidence and a sense of self-worth which in turn can promote solidarity amongst others. In ether case Moane states there “there is a buildup to a strong sense of personal strength, a sense of connection with others, and a capacity to take action, which are crucial parts of liberation psychology.”

CONCLUSION

Although this model proposed in Moane’s article is compelling and intrinsically makes sense there are some criticisms. The main issue with liberation psychology that was not addressed in the article was time frame of such a movement. Oppressed societies always have an element of violence either inherent or perceived. This fact makes mobility and up-rise very difficult. Not only is there a need for cohesiveness, and self-confidence described above, but the issue of safety was never addressed in the article. In other words Moane’s outline for liberation psychology is a compelling one, however the logistics of making such structural change in an oppressed society did not take into
consideration the oppositions side and repercussion for making, or attempting to make such global change. It would be fair to say that those individuals and systems in place that are creating the oppression are not going to turn a blind eye to the efforts of individuals participating in the global change described in liberation psychology.

With this said Maone’s argument is still received highly. Past attempts to deal with liberation have worked at the micro level, and there is a need to make a larger impact on the effects of oppressive societies. Liberation psychology attempts to create change at all levels; (micro, meso, and macro) which are necessary for any long term positive outcomes to occur. By empowering individuals, psychological patterns can be reduced and cohesiveness can be created. Once this occurs attempts can be made to positively change oppressive societies at the macro level.
Reference: