

# [Social justice theories and strategies: critical and liberation psychology](https://assignbuster.com/social-justice-theories-and-strategies-critical-and-liberation-psychology/)

Social Justice Theories and Strategies

Theories & Strengths

Critical Psychology. The underlying premise of Critical Psychology asserts that we should question our everyday world and beliefs, rather than accept them as an objective truth. Critical Psychology operates under the notion that our current psychological practices and theories are inadequate and maintain a status quo that we should be pushing up against rather than accepting and applying in our own practice (Nightingale & Neilands, 1997). Therefore, without mainstream psychology, critical psychology would not exist, as it is tied to changing the status quo taught through mainstream psychology courses. Not surprisingly, this is the same reason critical psychology is often met with resistance. When the status quo is challenged, those whose jobs rely on the status quo feel threatened as accepting the premise underlying critical psychology would mean abandoning their professions and risking their livelihoods (Nightingale & Neilands, 1997). It is reasonable to believe this is why some professionals may resist the teachings of critical psychology, as it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the reality that these views are inherently political.

I believe the strengths of critical psychology lie within the ontology of theory. The theory emphasizes that an individual should not be viewed as an independent entity and rather, should be considered within the context of their environment (Nightingale & Neilands, 1997). In other words, when considering clients in psychotherapy, their presenting concerns should not solely be attributed to internal factors, but external factors, particularly the influence the sociopolitical context has on their well-being. I believe this view allows us as clinicians to more competently work with any client by connecting to the framework of intersectionality proposed by Crenshaw (1991) that encourages us to examine how societal inequalities are intertwined in the multiple identities that all individuals hold. It forces us to, 1) recognize the presence of systematic discrimination, and 2) identify the ways in which this discrimination impacts one’s well-being.  For this reason, a strength of this approach seems to be that it is applicable to any client who enters the therapy room. It transcends this notion that an individual’s misery is “ a product of their own inadequacy” (Baumann, 2000 as cited by Nightingale & Comby, 2001, p. 118), and ultimately validates the experiences of what it is like to live with minority identities that are marginalized and oppressed in our society. I think this approach can be beneficial in the counseling room particularly because it can help reduce the blame and shame individuals self-impose when they are feeling stuck and confused as to why the active changes they are trying to make do not completely “ cure” their symptoms.

Liberation Psychology. Another theory to consider is that of Liberation Psychology, which stemmed from the realization that Latin American psychology was neglected across the disciplines, and rather, much of the profession has imported ideas of psychological theory and practice from the United States (Martin-Baro, 1994). The emergence of liberation psychology came from a recognition amongst scholars, such as Martin-Baro (1994), who described a need to contribute to the development of Latin American countries by redesigning theory and practice to better suit the needs of the individuals living in these countries while also honoring their histories and struggles. I believe the major strengths of liberation psychology lie within the push to include community voices in conversations that lend a hand to healing.

Similar to critical psychology, liberation psychology posits that an individual’s social and political contexts, in addition to the history of the systems that contribute to the marginalization and oppression of minority groups, need to be thoroughly considered so much so to the point where psychologists need to direct their energy to these larger system issues. In order to do this, we need to overcome the way in which psychologists tend to enter into systems, which is typically through the people who hold the power. One statement written by Martin-Barro (1994) that I believe really encapsulates this notion was, “ it is not easy to figure out how to place ourselves within the process alongside the dominated rather than alongside the dominator” (p. 29). This reminds me of the notion that as psychologists we work to uphold the status quo in some ways, similar to that suggested in critical psychology. In order to challenge the status quo one way would be to align ourselves with those that do not hold the power, and ultimately fall victim to the powers that be. Rather than thinking for people or solving their problems from our own positions of privilege, which we gain through education, but may also hold from the personal identities we were raised with, Martin-Barro (1994) highlighted the need to do the thinking with the people we are intending to help and learn from the people what mental health looks like from their perspective. This reminds me of the notion of not only working on behalf of our clients, but working alongside them, that is mentioned within the ACA Competencies.

Feminist and Multicultural Theories. The final theories I will consider are feminist and multicultural theory and how principles from these theories can be applied in social justice practice. Goodman and colleagues (2004) wrote about how feminist and multicultural principles can come together with counseling psychology in a natural way that recognizes the inception of counseling psychology. Counseling psychology, compared to other forms of psychology, such as clinical, has been different in a sense because from its inception it has considered how an individual’s environment shapes their well-being. Therefore, integrating multicultural and feminist principles leads to role of psychologists working within the system to change the system, rather than focusing solely on the micro level by working one-on-one with clients. These principles assert that the “ symptoms” people experiences can be conceptualized as a survival response to the oppressive conditions they are forced to reside in (Goodman et al., 2004). As such, these symptoms lead to the pathologizing of responses, with the way that psychologist may traditionally think of as maladaptive coping mechanisms or neurobiological deficits.

I think a major strength of feminist and multicultural theories is that the points mentioned in the aforementioned theories are integrated well and brought into a cohesive framework that can allow clinicians to think about action steps they could be taking to practice in a manner that promotes social justice. For example, common themes to draw from these principles includes ongoing self-examination, sharing power, giving voice, facilitating consciousness raising, building on strengths, and leaving clients with tools for social change (Goodman et al., 2004). In these themes, elements of addressing one’s own privilege and power are encouraged, establishing oneself as a “ co-learner” rather than an expert is a necessity, and approaching communities with trust that the community itself knows what it needs to thrive are all foundational principles found within critical psychology and liberation psychology. However, feminist and multicultural theory takes it an additional step further by providing guidance about what it may look like for clinicians to effect change at the individual and community level. In other words, I think these theories may be more easily understood and applied by clinicians than the latter theories because rather than strictly being an ideology, tangible suggestions are given as to how one should and could practice these principles.

Criticisms & Recommendations

A criticism that I have for both critical psychology and liberation psychology is how we as psychologists can address systematic issues as practitioners specifically, while also dealing with the reality that systemic issues will not change overnight, and our clients have to live in a reality that does not uplift their well-being. In other words, how can these theories operate in clinical practice? It seems we are stuck and confronted with a double-edged sword. If we choose to focus our energy on addressing systemic inequalities and empowering our clients to advocate for themselves and push against these systems, we may be creating undue distress in addition to the distress they have already been experiencing, which brought them into therapy initially. Even more so, our clients may not be consciously aware of the systems that may be negatively impacting their well-being and making them feel stuck. So, if we force them to confront this reality, we may be spinning them into a cycle of helplessness and hopelessness that they will only ever be able to reach a certain degree of wellness until the systematic changes are attended to. But as we know, these changes can take a very long time to come into play as they often start at the top and take a while to work their way down to the bottom, which is where individual level changes can be experienced.

On the other hand, if we aim to help them cope with the distress that comes from these environmental sources we are once again maintaining the status quo and allowing these systems to persist. We become complacent in the inequalities and some would even argue, we are perpetuating these inequalities. It’s difficult to imagine how we can do our work as psychologists in the traditional way we were thought to do so without revamping the entire system, from our training, to our healthcare systems, and so on.

In a similar vein, I believe a weakness of critical psychology lies within the applicability of the theory, with particular concern to the research methodologies we choose to employ. Although Nightingale and Neilands (1997) provided rationale to challenge our traditional methods of conducting research, suggestions on how to truly take into consideration the environmental context on were limited. Rather, the theory seems to provide an ideal to work towards rather than tangible suggestions as to how researchers could apply a critical psychology approach. Once again, it appears that truly applying this approach would mean working from the ground up by rethinking our measures, creating new measures that account for the unique characteristics of the culture under study, and although all of this has been done by numerous cross-cultural researchers, the implications of likelihood of publishing or being recognized for such work is questionable because mainstream psychology does not promote this way of thinking. In order for psychology to truly be liberated I think everyone needs to hold a similar mission in revamping our priorities and our practices in order to truly act in accordance with socially justice practice, in both research and clinical work.

Overall, it seems that the next step for the field of counseling psychology at large is to learn from the pioneers in the field who are actually putting these theories and ideologies into action. The establishment of multicultural competence guidelines was one step that allowed the field to start to move forward by recognizing that social justice work is a core value of our work, and now that the importance of this has been established, it is time we move past theory to strategy. I think the aforementioned theories are helpful in allowing us to critically think about why this work is needed and how our traditional ways of practicing psychology are not suitable for the diverse world we live in. In order to truly incorporate this value of social justice into our future as counseling psychologists we need to start training younger generations to practice these values. In order to do this, younger generations need role models to look up to and to learn from so discussion can move outside of the classroom and into the streets, where the real work needs to be done.

## References

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