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**Liberation psychology and trauma:
A systematic review across global contexts**

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INTRODUCTION

This systematic review examines the development and impact of Liberation Psychology, a critical approach within social psychology focused on the individual and collective psyche in contexts of oppression. The review traces its origins, growth, and influence on social and community psychology, particularly regarding the psychological effects of violence and oppression.

The study explores the socio-political context of Ignacio Martín-Baró's work in mid-20th-century Latin America, where he shaped Liberation Psychology by emphasizing the lived experiences of marginalized groups. His intellectual journey contributed to the core principles of the approach.

The review also delves into Liberation Psychology's theoretical foundations, highlighting its interdisciplinary influences. These foundations aim to transform psychology into a liberatory practice, challenging traditional paradigms. Following the PRISMA framework, the review analyzes key aspects of the studies, including their timeline, geographical focus, research methods, population groups, types of oppression, and trauma.

The findings highlight Liberation Psychology's enduring legacy, its relevance in Latin America, and its growing recognition globally. The study emphasizes the importance of social justice, cultural relevance, and community participation in shaping the future of psychology.

Ultimately, this review offers a valuable understanding of Liberation Psychology's trajectory, examining its expansion into diverse contexts and its potential as a critical framework in global psychological practice and research. It also reflects on how Liberation Psychology continues to evolve in response to contemporary challenges, making it a vital tool for addressing trauma and systemic oppression.

FIRST CHAPTER

Inception of Liberation Psychology

1.1. Socio-Political Context of Ignacio Martín-Baró's Work

Liberation Psychology emerged as a critical approach within social psychology, aiming to focus on the individual and collective psyche in contexts of oppression. Although there are various forms Liberatory Psychologies that have developed worldwide, the movement's flagship lies in the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró, whose research in the 1980s in El Salvador laid the foundation for this approach. Over the last 25 years, rich traditions of liberation work have emerged in different Latin American countries and other regions such as Ireland and South Africa (Sonn & Montero, 2009). It has also been applied in fields such as Community Social Psychology, certain modes of Political Psychology, and Educational Psychology. Although its influence has expanded globally, it remains a minority approach, particularly in regions where its focus on emancipation for oppressed communities is most relevant.

This approach critiques dominant Western psychological paradigms for their individualistic, decontextualized, and objectifying perspectives. Martín-Baró retained that these frameworks, when applied to oppressed societies, not only fail to address the real issues at hand but also perpetuate dehumanizing conditions. In contrast, Liberation Psychology emphasizes a praxis that is socially engaged, contextually grounded, and committed to transformative action, one that is collaboratively created and acted upon (Martín-Baró, 1994; Sonn & Montero, 2009).

His critique extended to the dominant classifications of mental disorders, during the 1980's in the *DSM-III*. He saw the urgent need to shift the perspective on mental health, urging

to change the perspective from viewing disorders primarily as dysfunction of internal functioning, but instead recognizing them as the manifestation of the humanizing or alienating nature of a framework of social relations, which are historically shaped by both individuals and communities (Blanco, 2023).

Therefore, Liberation Psychology emphasizes a praxis that is socially engaged, contextually grounded, and committed to transformative action—one that is collaboratively created and acted upon (Martín-Baró, 1994; Sonn & Montero, 2009). One of his many critiques on how psychology should redefine its horizon emphasized that:

"the problem with individualism lies in its insistence on seeing in the individual what is often found only in the collectivity, or in attributing to individuality what is only produced in the dialectic of interpersonal relationships. In this way, individualism ends up reinforcing existing structures by ignoring the reality of social structures and reducing structural problems to personal ones (Martín-Baró, 1998, own translation)."

To fully grasp this approach, it must be understood both as a contribution to psychology and as a voice born from a context of oppression. Martín-Baró's ideas were profoundly shaped by the historical and social conditions of his time, and understanding this context is crucial for appreciating the depth and urgency of his call for a psychology that serves the liberation of oppressed peoples. Equally important is the recognition that wherever liberation psychology is to be practiced, its implementation must be rooted in the specific social, cultural, and historical realities of the people (Portillo, 2012).

1.2. Socio-Political Context of Mid-20th Century Latin America

The mid-20th century in Latin America was marked by intense socio-political upheaval, where revolutions, authoritarian regimes, and heightened militarization created a "vortex" of violence and instability (Granés, 2022). This period was characterized, throughout the region, by widespread systemic violence, repression, and socio-economic inequality. This reality was the manifestation of a history that made it possible and that had left deep scars on the collective psyche, which kept deepening and being reopened. This laid the foundation for movements advocating for justice, equality, and social change. Within this volatile context, Liberation Psychology emerged as a radical response to collective trauma (Bryant, 2024).

Midst the socio-political turbulence, the region became a battleground for competing ideological forces. The United States, aiming to suppress leftist movements, supported military dictatorships and repressive regimes, while the Soviet Union aligned with revolutionary ideologies and guerrilla movements. This external involvement intensified internal class struggles and exacerbated existing conflicts, characterized by a small elite controlling most of the land and resources, leaving the rural majority to endure systemic oppression and poverty. The movements that would emerge advocating for labor rights and land reform were violently suppressed by oligarchic regimes (Granés, 2022; Burgenthal, 1995).

This atmosphere of repression culminated in conflicts like the Salvadoran Civil War (1980–1992), defined by massacres, forced disappearances, and mass displacement. In El Salvador, state violence escalated as the government, bolstered by U.S. military aid, sought to eradicate the insurgent group Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and its civilian supporters. This was the sociopolitical climate in which Martín-Baró lived and worked as he wrote his thesis and engaged in a liberatory praxis of social psychology. In his unpublished work *Psychosocial Roots of War in El Salvador* (1981), he recounts being jolted awake one night by the detonation of a bomb just outside the Jesuit residence where he lived. Martín-Baró faced the chemical effects, paralyzing fear, and an overwhelming sense of

vulnerability and rejected the pleas from colleagues urging him to flee to the U.S. for his safety, he remained in El Salvador, working directly with those most affected by the conflict. He continued to write, attend conferences, and publicly denounce the atrocities taking place in plain sight, under U.S. monetary sponsorship. The Jesuits at the UCA were repeatedly threatened and asked to abandon their work, as paramilitary groups that operated under slogans like “Be A Patriot, Kill A Priest”, had already assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero along with several priests and nuns (Portillo, 2012). Ultimately, the Salvadoran government’s brutal repression culminated in large-scale atrocities, including the infamous El Mozote massacre and the massacre of six Jesuit priests among which was Martín-Baró.

1.3. Ignacio Martín-Baró: Life and Contributions

Ignacio Martín-Baró (1942–1989) was a Spanish-born Jesuit priest and social psychologist whose work became the cornerstone of Liberation Psychology. Born in 1942 during Francisco Franco’s dictatorship, he joined the Jesuit order at a young age and was sent to El Salvador in 1959 to complete his spiritual and intellectual training. Since their arrival to the Americas in the 16th century, the Jesuit communities in the region, deeply engaged with both the rural and impoverished populations and the academic elites, this profoundly influenced Martín-Baró’s approach to scholarship and activism, two aspects that were always hand on hand (Portillo, 2012; Tojeira, 1989).

While working in rural communities near San Salvador, Martín-Baró simultaneously studied and taught at the University of Central America (UCA), a Jesuit institution. His academic journey also took him through universities in Quito, Bogotá, Frankfurt, Brussels, and Chicago, where he pursued studies in philosophy, theology, psychology, and other humanitarian disciplines. During his studies, he engaged in missionary work with marginalized communities, including Afro-Colombians and Indigenous peoples in Colombia's Chocó region,

as well as with Hispanic immigrants during his time in Brussels. These experiences deeply shaped his early commitment to bridging theory and practice (Portillo, 2012).

After earning his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Chicago, Martín-Baró returned to El Salvador in 1979 to develop his vision of political and critical social psychology. His work purposely shifted the focus to the lived realities of marginalized populations, emphasizing participatory research. His surveys revealed the stark contrast in freedom of expression between the elite and the poor and exposed widespread abuses, such as the systemic sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers in rural areas. These efforts directly challenged the government's narratives and highlighted the psychological toll of repression on marginalized communities (Portillo, 2012; Tojeira, 1989).

Martín-Baró's work in Liberation Psychology became a vital tool for exposing the government's false narratives and addressing the psychological toll of repression. In 1989 he established the University Institute of Public Opinion at UCA to enable participatory research that systematically uncovered discrepancies between the state's claims and the lived realities of the population.

He used opinion surveys to counter the Salvadorian government's propaganda about the opinions of the population (Martín-Baró, 1989; 1996), both feeding the results back to the government and making them available to an international audience. This was an important contribution in undermining the support the United States provided to the Salvadoran military.

Surveys conducted by the Institute challenged official narratives on several fronts. Contrary to government claims that the population opposed dialogue with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the data revealed significant public support for dialogue. The findings also exposed widespread abuses, such as the systemic sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers in rural areas, directly contradicting state assertions of improving

human rights. Additionally, the research highlighted the pervasive fear among marginalized populations to express their opinions publicly, in stark contrast to the relative freedom of the elite.

Through these efforts, Martín-Baró used empirical evidence to *de-ideologize* political discourse, countering the state's distorted narratives and highlighting the psychological effects of living in such a "schizophrenic" reality, as Gránes (2022) would call it, on the people. His work not only revealed the psychological and social impact of repression but also provided a framework for empowering oppressed communities. Tragically, his life was cut short on November 16, 1989, when he was assassinated by a government-aligned death squad, alongside five fellow Jesuit professors and two UCA employees. This event underscored the risks faced by those challenging entrenched systems of power. Nevertheless, his work has continued to influence approaches to understanding the psychological dimensions of social conflict and the potential for collective action in addressing these challenges (Burgenthal, 1995; Burton, 2013).

SECOND CHAPTER

Liberation Psychology

2.1. Key Theoretical Foundations

Liberation Theology emerged amid socio-political turmoil as a radical reinterpretation of Catholicism, grounded in social justice and a “preferential option for the poor” (Gutiérrez, 1988; Martín-Baró, 1994). Historically, the Catholic Church had often aligned with colonial and post-colonial systems of domination, though notable exceptions, such as Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566), who denounced the brutal treatment of Indigenous peoples during colonization (Ferm, 1986; Gutiérrez, 1988). While invoking historical episodes may seem far-fetched, liberatory movements encourage the rediscovery of elements from the past that can be applied to current struggles, as Fals Borda (1985) argued, to increase *concientización* and foster a discerning historical consciousness (Martín-Baró, 1994).

The Church's transformation culminated in two pivotal events: the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín (1968). These gatherings emphasized the need for clergy to engage directly with the struggles of marginalized communities (Tate et al., 2013). Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez crystallized these ideas in *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), advocating for structural change and resistance to oppression. Liberatory movements have since drawn on historical episodes, to foster *concientización* and deideologize historical and present realities (Fals Borda, 1985; Martín-Baró, 1994).

This emphasis on praxis and social justice inspired intellectual movements across disciplines, including the emergence of an emancipatory Latin American philosophy postulated in the 1972 Córdoba Conference, where terms like “liberation,” “oppression,” and “servitude”

became central to the region's intellectual struggle. Influential figures such as Paulo Freire (1921-1997) in education and Augusto Boal (1931-2009) in theatre extended these ideas into broader cultural contexts. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) deeply influenced Martín-Baró, offering a framework for critical reflection and transformative action, which he adapted to psychology. Freire first coined the concept of *conscientização*, the development of critical consciousness. Similarly, Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* (1979) proposed a creative and emancipatory practice that resonates with liberation psychology's goals of empowerment and challenging systemic oppression. Martín-Baró synthesized these principles to develop a psychology that empowered oppressed populations and actively contested the status quo (Granés, 2022; Burton, 2013).

2.2. Core Principles

Liberation Psychology critiques dominant Eurocentric psychological frameworks that Martín-Baró argued often serve as tools of cultural control, supporting hegemonic forces while ignoring systemic inequities. He believed true self-awareness required confronting these social realities, a task that traditional psychology had largely overlooked.

Martín-Baró (1994) drew heavily from the core principles of Liberation Theology, particularly the belief in a “*God of life*”, the primacy of “*orthopraxis over orthodoxy*”, and the “*preferential option for the poor*”, adapting them into three foundational principles of Liberation Psychology: A New Horizon, A New Epistemology, and A New Praxis (Burton, 2013).

A New Horizon: This principle calls for a new direction in psychology, one focused not on adapting to oppressive conditions, but on envisioning and working toward a liberated future. The lived experiences of the oppressed are central to this approach, transforming psychological practice into a tool for imagining and achieving new possibilities for human

development. Psychology must prioritize marginalized communities, addressing systemic injustices and empowering individuals to regain control over their lives.

A New Epistemology: Martín-Baró argued that psychological knowledge is not a neutral truth but is deeply intertwined with the struggles of the oppressed. He emphasized that serving the liberation of the people requires a new way of acquiring knowledge — one rooted not in their present oppression but in the possibilities of their future liberty. This perspective demands a shift in both epistemology and praxis.

Psychologists must adopt a perspective "from below," aligning their practices with the lived realities of the oppressed and prioritizing social justice, human development, and community empowerment. Instead of viewing psychosocial processes from the vantage point of the dominator, Liberation Psychology poses the challenge to explore these processes from the perspective of the dominated, whose truth is yet to be created.

A New Praxis: Martín-Baró called for a new praxis in psychology. This approach centers the work of psychologists on the needs and experiences of marginalized populations. Rather than treating individual symptoms in isolation, psychologists are urged to understand and intervene within broader social, political, and economic contexts. Liberation Psychology, therefore, becomes not just a tool for individual healing but a practice for collective transformation, addressing psychological trauma caused by systemic oppression and empowering communities to challenge and change these structures.

These principles - new horizon, new epistemology, and new praxis - serve as the bedrock of Liberation Psychology, offering a framework for transforming psychology into a liberatory practice. They prioritize collective liberation, social justice, and human development, over individual adjustment or purely theoretical inquiry.

Martín-Baró's ideas called for psychology to shift from individualistic models to ones rooted in history and social relations. He argued that mental health and illness reflect the

humanizing or alienating nature of historical relationships. His analysis of the psychological impacts of war, including the polarization and rupture of social relations, critiqued dominant paradigms that ignored the societal contexts of trauma.

These ideas resonate with individual-focused approaches that overlook systemic exploitation. Martín-Baró extended these critiques, advocating and understanding trauma as a psychosocial phenomenon, particularly for survivors of war and systemic violence (Lykes, 2012).

After his assassination, Martín-Baró's work inspired psychologists to focus on marginalized populations, including those affected by conflict, displacement, and inequality. His legacy continues to challenge individualistic models and inform community-based, emancipatory practices worldwide.

Through the tasks of recovering historical memory, de-ideologizing reality and sponsoring critical consciousness, Martín-Baró hoped for psychology to become a liberatory praxis and liberate itself from complicity with dominant power structures.

THIRD CHAPTER

Objectives and methodology

3. 1. Aim and Rationale of the Study

In line with the considerations above, this systematic review aims to explore the different ways in which Liberation Psychology has been adopted and has influenced the field since its inception in Latin America. Specifically, it seeks to trace its early formulations, its subsequent development, and its impact on social and community psychology, mapping its theoretical and practical evolution over time, particularly in relation to the psychological consequences of oppression and violence.

This study examines how Liberation Psychology has taken root in Latin America, analyzing the extent to which it has shaped psychological theory and praxis in the region in the context of collective and individual trauma. Additionally, it explores how its principles have been adapted or mirrored in other postcolonial contexts, identifying commonalities and divergences in addressing trauma resulting from various forms of oppression. At the same time, the research considers its application in Western contexts, such as the United States and Europe, questioning whether it could be meaningfully implemented in societies where it might be perceived as an "alien" psychology, and how these contexts might understand trauma within the framework of Liberation Psychology.

From these considerations, we ask the following specific research questions, which underpin the rationale of our inquiry:

1. How has Liberation Psychology evolved beyond its origins in El Salvador, and to what extent does it continue to address the specific concerns of Latin American psychologists today, particularly in relation to psychosocial trauma

2. What is the contemporary relevance and applicability of Liberation Psychology on a global scale, especially in addressing trauma caused by systemic oppression and violence?

3. How is Liberation Psychology received, adapted, or challenged in societies that hold hegemonic influence in psychology and social sciences, and what are the implications for understanding and addressing trauma in diverse cultural contexts?

By focusing on these questions, this paper aims to provide a valuable overview of Liberation Psychology's trajectory. It will assess its influence within Latin America, its expansion into other socio-political contexts, and its viability as a framework in Western societies. Furthermore, the study will explore how Liberation Psychology continues to evolve in response to contemporary global challenges and whether it can serve as a critical tool for psychological practice and research in diverse cultural settings.

3.2. Methodology and PRISMA framework

This study follows a systematic review methodology to synthesize existing literature on Liberation Psychology. A systematic review is a rigorous research design that identifies, evaluates, and synthesizes a broad corpus of scientific literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of a specific topic. To ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility, we adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The review process was structured into three main phases: identification, screening, and eligibility, as illustrated in Figure 1.

3.3. Search strategy

The literature search was conducted across three electronic databases: Scopus, APA PsycInfo, and Redalyc, from which only journal articles were taken into consideration. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in psychology and related disciplines.

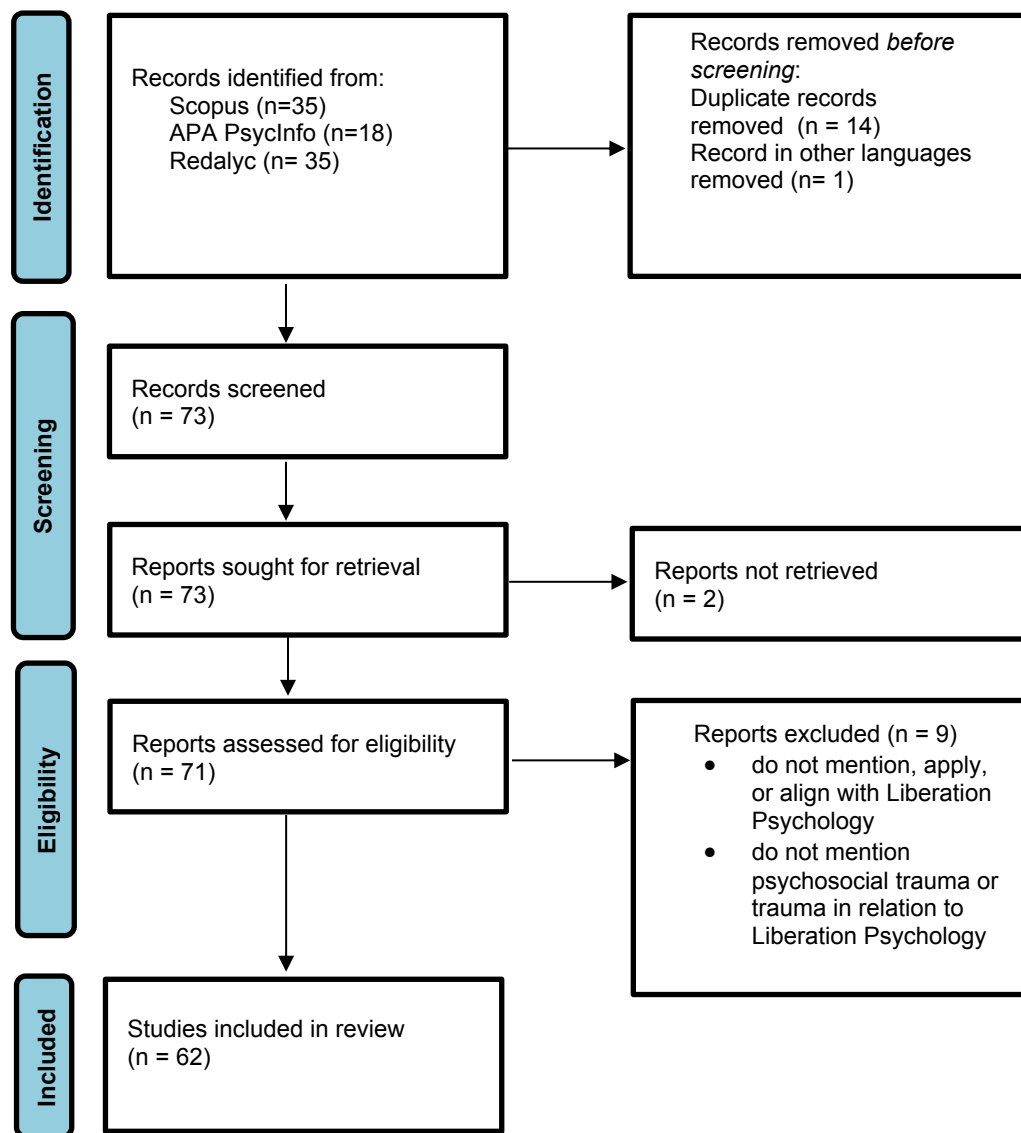


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

Redalyc (Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina y el Caribe, España y Portugal) was specifically included because it is a Latin American database, ensuring access to a substantial portion of the region's academic literature that may not be widely available in global databases. Given that Liberation Psychology originated and kept being developed in Latin America, this inclusion was crucial to capturing relevant studies.

As illustrated in Table 1, the initial search yielded a total of 88 records: 35 from Scopus, 18 from APA PsycInfo, and 35 from Redalyc.

Table 1. The search strategy.

Scopus	Search query: TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Liberation psychology” OR “Martin-Baro”) AND “trauma” OR “psychosocial trauma”
	Identified records: 35 (journal articles in English)
PsycInfo	Search query: AB (“Liberation psychology” OR “Martin-Baro”) AND “trauma” OR “psychosocial trauma”
	Identified records: 18 (journal articles in English)
Redalyc	Search query: (“Psicología de la liberación” OR “Martín Baró”) AND “trauma” OR “trauma psicosocial”)
	Identified records: 35 (psychology journal articles in Spanish and English)

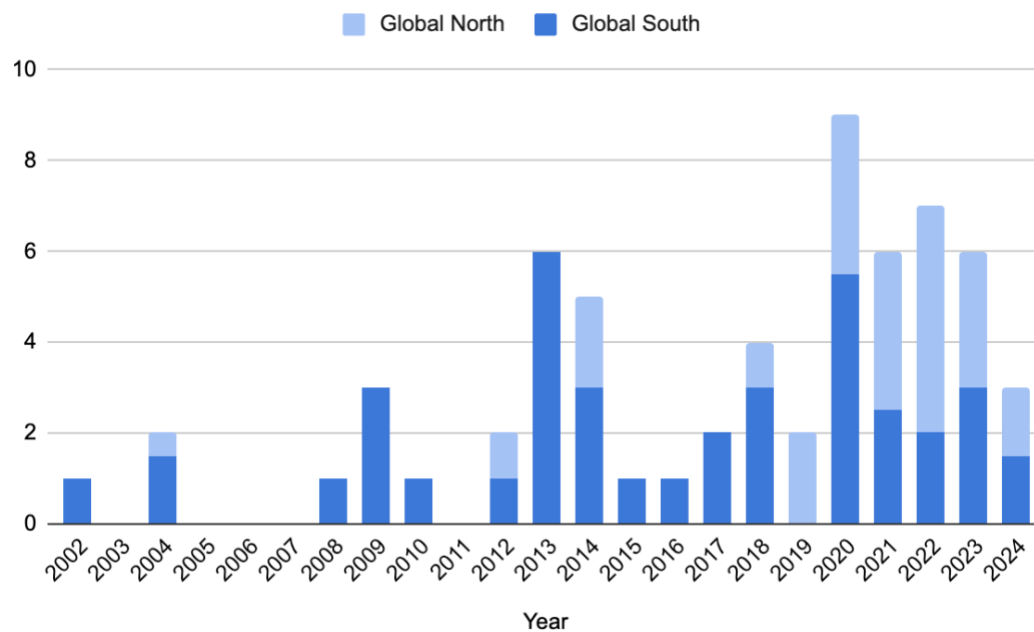
Before screening, 14 duplicate records and 1 record in a language other than English or Spanish were removed, and 2 were not retrieved, resulting in 71 records for screening. Of which 9 didn’t pass the eligibility criteria, resulting in 62 remaining. The final selection comprised 71 studies, which were reviewed and analyzed. The selection process was systematically documented using a spreadsheet to record essential bibliographic details, including title, year of publication, author(s), journal, country of interest, population of interest, methodology, theoretical frameworks, concepts of trauma and scenarios of oppression, limitations and key findings. This approach ensured a structured and reproducible synthesis of the literature.

CHAPTER 4

Results and Analysis

4.1. Timeline and Study Area

Figure 2. presents the temporal distribution of the studies included in the systematic review, categorized by the year of publication. The trend suggests a generally growing research interest in this topic, with the number of studies increasing in recent years. Notably, the majority of the studies were written from 2013 onward, with a peak occurring that same at 2020 and with half of the studies being written from that year on . The increasing number of publications highlights the increasing relevance of this research field, as it keeps evolving in Latin America and awakening interest in the Global North.



Figure

2. Temporal distribution of the articles included in the systematic review.

Note. Light blue corresponds to reports from the Global North (North American and Western European countries). Dark blue corresponds to reports from the Global South (Latin-American, African, South-East-Asian and Arab countries).

Figure 3 illustrates the geographical distribution of the studies. The study area corresponds to the countries where empirical research was conducted, as well as the geographical focus of conceptual articles and reviews. Most research adopts a multifocal approach, referring to multiple countries. The data reveal a concentration of studies focusing on the Americas mostly in Latin America (34), with higher concentration in Chile and Colombia, and with the United States being the most referenced (20 records).

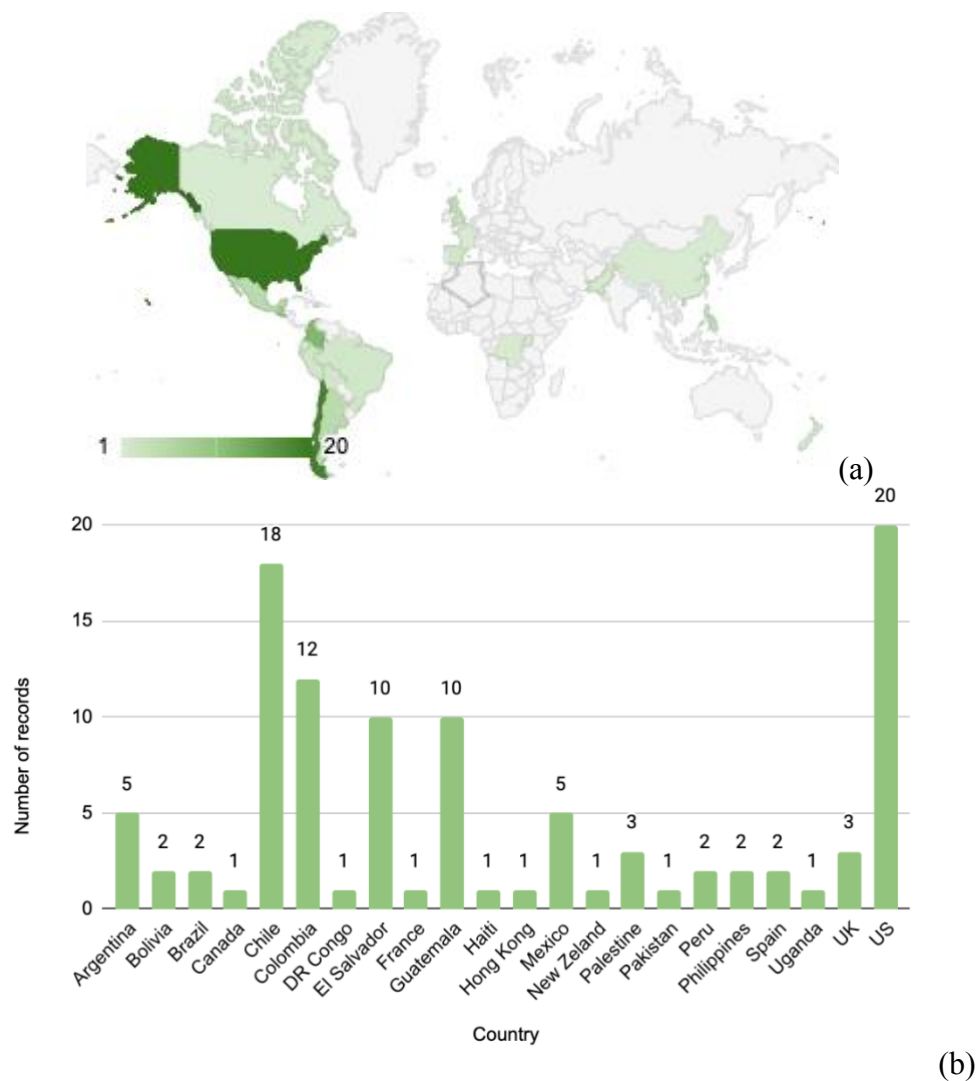


Figure 3. (a,b) Study area of the articles included in the systematic review.

4.2. Research Designs and Methods

Figure 4 classifies the research designs employed in the included studies. Among the selected articles, 51.6% are empirical, involving qualitative or quantitative data collection and analysis, while 48.4% are non-empirical, consisting of conceptual or theoretical works.

Within the empirical studies, 33.9% adopt a case study approach, 11.3% rely on ethnographic methods, 4.8% apply experimental designs, and 1.9% utilize surveys. The non-empirical articles include 24.2% theoretical analyses, mostly papers proposing conceptual frameworks or discussing theoretical foundations, 22.6% literature reviews, and 1.6% commentaries. A research design flowchart (Figure 4) illustrates this classification.

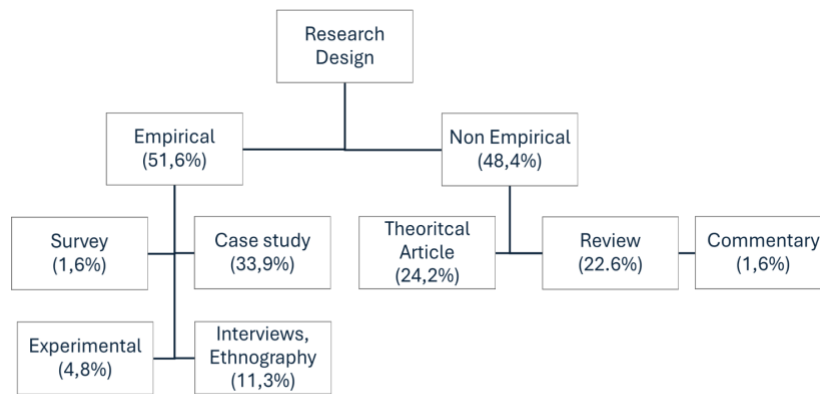


Figure 4. Research design of articles included in the systematic review.

Furthermore, among the empirical studies 84.38% use qualitative methods, 9.38% employ quantitative methods, and 6.25% follow a mixed-methods approach. As most records work with single case studies.

4.3. Population Groups

The analysis of the different population groups of interest revealed that creating fixed categories was highly limiting. Many individuals, groups, and communities experience overlapping and intersecting characteristics that place them in disadvantaged and oppressed positions within the historical and societal contexts in which they live. Their roles within existing systems further shape their experiences of marginalization. For example, many

immigrants and refugees come from contexts of armed conflict and violence. Throughout their transitions—both geographically and socially—they face multiple vulnerabilities. Some may have been part of a racialized minority in their country of origin, while others may only become a minority upon arrival in their new country.

One case study, for instance, examines the experiences of Mohajir women in response to direct and structural violence (Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009). The Mohajirs are those whose families migrated from India after the 1947 Partition. The study participants were women who arrived in Karachi, Pakistan, settling in basti communities on the outskirts of the city. The participants also described losing at least one close family member during the conflict and experienced direct violence, such as incursions into their homes, robbery, killings, and harassment by law enforcement and by militant groups. The authors characterized their experience as one of totalizing violence, where ongoing trauma permeates all aspects of their lives. These women's experiences of violence are also shaped by the intersection of class, ethnicity, and gender. Therefore, adopting an intersectionality lens could help to understand the stratification of vulnerabilities experienced by the participants in the selected studies.

4.4. Type of Oppression or Trauma

The studies explore various forms of trauma and oppression emphasizing psychosocial trauma as a critical framework for understanding the impact of these experiences (Lykes, 2012, 2014; Kamens, 2012). This approach moves beyond individualistic models like PTSD to consider the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which trauma occurs (Piper, 2008; Reyes Valenzuela et al., 2020). The records demonstrate that trauma is not solely an individual experience but is also a collective phenomenon that affects communities and is transmitted across generations (Lykes, 2012, 2014). Figure 5 shows the key themes that emerge across the records.

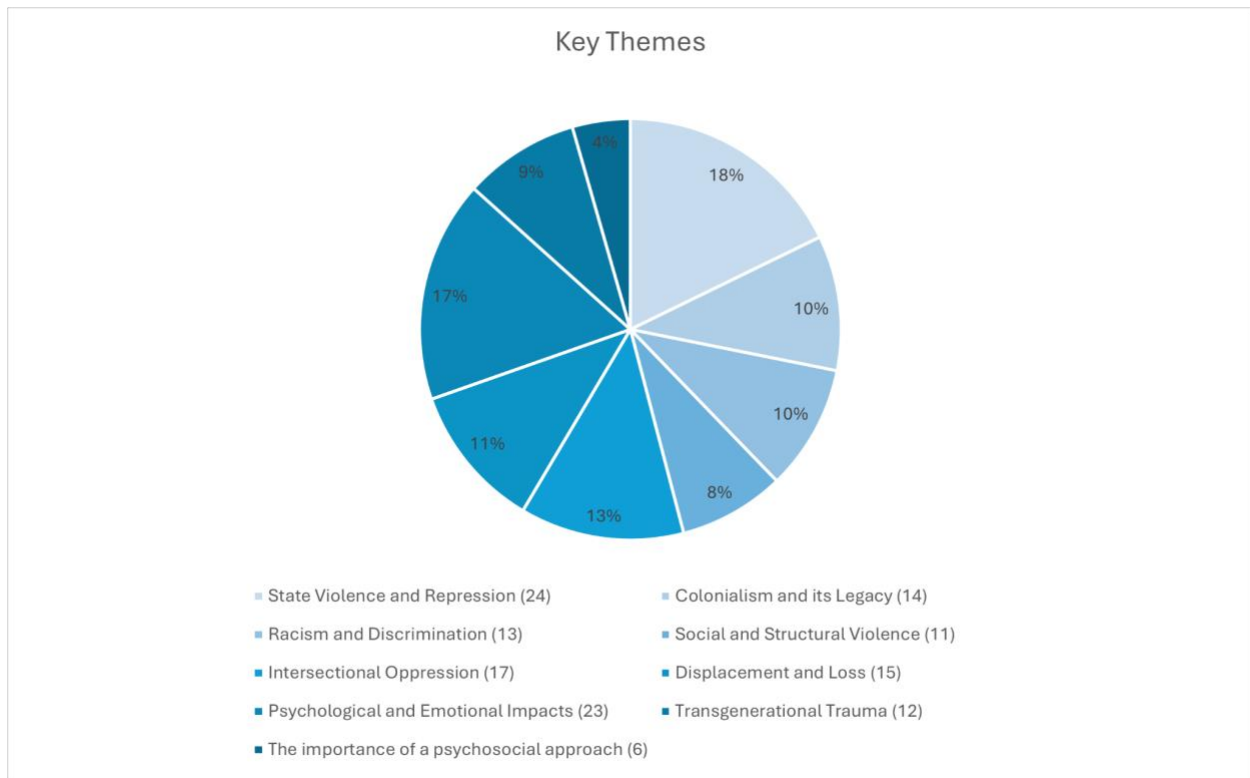


Figure 5. Key factors in the experience of trauma and oppression.

State Violence and Repression: Many populations have experienced direct violence from their own governments, including massacres, killings, disappearances, and forced displacement e.g. (Reyes Valenzuela et al., 2020; (Faúndez et al., 2013). This is often linked to political persecution, torture, and imprisonment. U.S. foreign policy and intervention are noted as contributing factors in some cases. For example, in Guatemala, the U.S. supported military dictatorships that committed atrocities against the Maya (Lykes, 2012, 2014). And in Colombia, human rights activists and community leaders are targeted by state-sponsored violence, paramilitary groups, and other armed actors, which can include war-related trauma, witnessing massacres, displacement, and assassinations (Hernández, 2002).

Colonialism and its Legacy: The historical and ongoing violence of colonialism—structural, physical, emotional, and psychological—remains a major source of trauma and oppression. Torres Rivera & Torres Fernández (2025) highlight how colonization has left deep emotional and identity scars in the Latinx population, linking this oppression to mental health

issues such as PTSD and depression. Liu et al. (2014) describe this as "soul wounds," passed across generations and contributing to anxiety, depression, suicide, and substance abuse. Beyond individual trauma, colonization has led to the loss of culture and language, widening social and economic disparities and reinforcing internalized oppression.

Racism and Discrimination: Racism operates at individual, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic levels, contributing to ethnic-racial trauma (Jamal, 2024) through discrimination and microaggressions that impact mental well-being. For BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) individuals in the U.S., persistent racism fosters hypervigilance, leading to long-term trauma.

Systemic racism and intersecting oppressions create chronic stress e.g. (Lykes, 2012, 2014; Adames et al., 2023), encompassing institutional, cultural, interpersonal, and internalized racism. Embedded in structures and policies, racism perpetuates inequality, making it a constant force in daily life. Gendered racism, where race and sexism intersect, further compounds these experiences (Gupta et al., 2019).

Social and Structural Violence: Oppression is embedded within social, cultural, and political structures, leading to poverty, inequality, and lack of access to basic services (Lykes, 2012, 2014; Kamens, 2012) This includes the structural violence of poverty, everyday oppression, and cultural imperialism (Kamens, 2012) . The breakdown of community ties, loss of cultural identity, and social disorganization contribute to trauma (Torres Rivera & Torres Fernández, 2025).

Intersectional Oppression: Multiple forms of oppression based on race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ability, immigration status, and national origin create a matrix of domination. This intersectionality shapes individual experiences of violence and trauma.

AfroLatinx women in the U.S. face unique discrimination at the intersection of racism and sexism (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019), experiencing sexual objectification, invisibility, and

internalized stereotypes. Similarly, it is highlighted how class, ethnicity, and gender shape women's experiences of violence (French et al., 2020). The intersection of gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status further increases vulnerability to sexual violence, illustrating the layered impact of overlapping oppressions.

Displacement and Loss: Forced displacement and loss of homes are significant sources of trauma (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009). This results in emotional, social, and physical loss, generating feelings of insecurity, fear, sadness, and anger (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009). Refugees and displaced individuals face additional challenges such as discrimination, loss of status, and devaluation of credentials (Taknint et al., 2023).

Psychological and Emotional Impacts: Trauma manifests in various ways, including fear, anxiety, sadness, loss, helplessness, and hopelessness. Oppressed and violence-exposed populations experience trauma that affects both mental health and collective well-being (Kamens, 2012). It's also analyzed how experiences of torture in Chile led to psychological, emotional, bodily, and identity breakdowns (Faúndez et al., 2014). The trauma not only impacted survivors but also affected second and third generations after the dictatorship. Additionally, the significant emotional toll on practitioners who listened to torture testimonies is noted.

Transgenerational Trauma: The consequences of trauma can be transmitted across generations, according to one intersectional study in neurobiology, liberation psychology, and social work, this happens through biological, familial, and social factors, highlighting that oppression and trauma are also perpetuated epigenetically.

Intergenerational trauma, according to (Faúndez et al., 2014) is transmitted through family narratives, parenting styles, and cultural practices. A review on forced disappearances in Chile, 40 years after the coup d'état, found that trauma persists through family dynamics and expectations, shaping collective experiences. The grandchildren of political prisoners

experience "double oppression," facing both historical and ethnic discrimination, demonstrating how past injustices continue to marginalize specific groups.

The importance of a psychosocial approach: The records emphasize the importance of looking beyond individual experiences of trauma and paying attention to the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which trauma occurs e.g. (Lykes, 2012, 2014; Blanco et al., 2016) This approach also focuses on collective trauma and the importance of community support and intervention.

Overall, the records reviewed demonstrate the complex and multifaceted nature of trauma and oppression, emphasizing the need for a holistic, psychosocial approach that considers the interplay of individual experiences and broader systemic factors. This model allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the far-reaching effects of oppression and violence, while highlighting the importance of working towards structural change and creating more just and equitable societies e.g. (Lee, 2022; Piper, 2008)

4.5. Theoretical and practical proposals

Reports addressing issues ranging from torture and trauma due to conflict to gender and racial discrimination, as well as broader analyses of theoretical and practical solutions, consistently emphasize the need for a paradigm shift in how trauma and oppression are understood and addressed. A central theme across these reports is the recognition that trauma is not solely an individual experience but a collective one, deeply shaped by social, political, and historical contexts. As a result, interventions must move beyond individualistic medical models and towards comprehensive, multi-level approaches that acknowledge the interconnectedness of personal suffering and societal structures (Lykes, 2012, 2014). In Figure 6 some key observations across various reports that highlight several crucial aspects.

	<i>n</i>	%
Contextualized Understanding	14	7,14%
Moving Beyond Individualism	6	3,06%
Prioritizing Active Listening, Witnessing, and Validation	4	2,04%
Community and Collective Action	12	6,12%
Empowerment and Agency	11	5,61%
Culturally Sensitive Practice	20	10,20%
Therapeutic Relationships	9	4,59%
Addressing Collective Trauma	5	2,55%
Conscientization and De-ideologization	11	5,61%
Importance of Memory and Truth	10	5,10%
Truth, Justice, and Reparation	13	6,63%
Social Repair	5	2,55%
Interdisciplinary Approaches	14	7,14%
Challenging the Medical Model	6	3,06%
Long-Term Support	15	7,65%
Addressing Root Causes	21	10,71%
Challenging Neutrality	20	10,20%

Figure 6. Key themes that emerge across the records.

Contextualized Understanding: Trauma must be understood within its specific historical, social, and political context, including factors such as state violence, political repression, structural inequalities, and cultural imperialism. Additionally, the impact of intergenerational trauma must be considered, as the effects of violence often transmit across generations, shaping identities and relationships, e.g. (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009; Afuape & Kerry Oldham, 2022).

Moving Beyond Individualism: A shift away from individualistic models towards psychosocial approaches is necessary. Effective interventions must address the collective nature of trauma by focusing on families, communities, and societies rather than solely on isolated individuals, e.g. (Blanco & Díaz, 2004; Alcolta & Aravana-Reyes, 2020).

Multi-dimensional Approach: Trauma encompasses more than just psychological effects; it also has emotional, social, and political dimensions. Interventions should address all

these aspects, recognizing how violence disrupts social relationships and individual and collective life projects, e.g. (Jemal, 2024; Morales & Cornejo, 2013).

Prioritizing Active Listening, Witnessing, and Validation: Creating safe spaces where victims can share their stories and have their experiences validated is crucial. The concept of a "chain of listening" can help break the silence surrounding traumatic experiences e.g. (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009; López, 2013).

Community and Collective Action: Given the collective nature of trauma, group and community-based interventions tend to be more effective than individual approaches. Emphasis should be placed on restoring community ties, fostering relational reliance, and encouraging collective support. Moreover, community-driven processes and participatory approaches should be prioritized, e.g. (Piper, 2008; Lykes, 2012, 2014).

Empowerment and Agency: Victims must be recognized not as passive sufferers but as active participants in their healing and recovery. They should be seen as agents of change and resistance. Interventions should focus on empowerment, supporting individuals in defining their own identities, challenging oppressive discourses, and working toward self-determination, e.g. (Lykes, 2012, 2014; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009; Burton, 2013; Bryant, 2024).

Culturally Sensitive Practice: Interventions should be culturally and contextually relevant, incorporating local knowledge, cultural practices, and indigenous healing methods. Additionally, therapists must critically examine their own biases and be aware of power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship, e.g. (Taknint et al., 2023; Kamens, 2012; Abarca et al., 2018).

Therapeutic Relationships: A safe and trusted therapeutic relationship is essential for victims to feel recognized and validated. Therapists must be present, engaged, and open to having their own views challenged. They cannot remain neutral; instead, they must take a clear

stance in support of the victim while being open to transformation through the process, e.g. (Kamens, 2012; Lindorfer 2009).

Addressing Collective Trauma: Beyond individual trauma, interventions should aim to restore community ties and relational reliance, as these fundamental aspects of social life are often destroyed by violence, e.g. (Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009).

Conscientization and De-ideologization: There is a pressing need to challenge the "institutionalization of lies" by raising critical awareness of the structural causes of trauma through dialogue, reflection, and social action, e.g. (Lykes, 2012, 2014). This process involves de-ideologizing everyday experiences, questioning dominant narratives, and making social realities more transparent (Kamens, 2012; Cabrera & Castañeda-Sound, 2022).

Importance of Memory and Truth: The reconstruction and recovery of historical memory play a vital role in validating victims' experiences and promoting collective healing. This can be achieved through truth-telling, storytelling, sharing circles, and commemoration, e.g. (Lykes, 2012, 2014;).

Truth, Justice, and Reparation: Addressing past injustices, fighting impunity, and ensuring access to justice and reparations are essential for the healing process. This includes moral reparation, which counteracts the intentions of victimizers e.g. (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2019).

Social Repair: Effective interventions should aim to restore social networks, rebuild interpersonal trust, and strengthen community cohesion e.g. (Lykes, 2012, 2014; López, 2013). Forming alliances and networks is crucial to supporting broader social transformation initiatives, e.g. (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009).

Interdisciplinary Approaches: Collaboration between mental health professionals, community activists, lawyers, and other stakeholders is essential for holistic interventions, e.g. (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009; French et al., 2020).

Challenging the Medical Model: Moving beyond purely medicalized and individualistic approaches, trauma should be understood as an adaptive response to extreme conditions rather than as a pathology. The goal should not be limited to symptom reduction but should also encompass lived experience, meaning, and connection, e.g. (Peters, 2021).

Long-Term Support: Given the enduring nature of trauma from conflict and oppression, long-term support and follow-up are necessary. The continuous states of oppression that sustain trauma must also be acknowledged, e.g. (Taknint et al., 2023; Mitton, 2023).

Addressing Root Causes: Interventions must tackle the social, political, and economic structures that perpetuate violence and inequality. Recognizing the connections between global political and economic systems and suffering is essential, e.g. (Lykes, 2012, 2014; Gómez & Rojas, 2023)

Challenging Neutrality: The notion of scientific neutrality must be rejected, as trauma work is inherently political. Researchers and practitioners should explicitly define their political and ethical positions, e.g. (Lindorfer, 2009).

These observations collectively call for a radical transformation in theory and practice, emphasizing the necessity of moving beyond individualistic, medicalized approaches toward models that integrate social justice, cultural relevance, and community participation. By decolonizing psychology, training clinicians in liberation approaches, and challenging power dynamics within therapeutic and research settings, the ultimate goal is to create a more just and equitable society that addresses the root causes of violence and oppression.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This systematic review has traced the evolution, application, and impact of Liberation Psychology, revealing its significance both as a response to specific historical contexts and as a globally relevant framework for understanding and addressing oppression and trauma. Emerging from the crucible of socio-political upheaval in Latin America, particularly in El Salvador, Liberation Psychology has grown into a powerful approach that challenges dominant psychological paradigms and advocates for social justice.

5.1. Evolution and Relevance in Latin America

Liberation Psychology originated with the work of Ignacio Martín-Baró in El Salvador in the 1980s, amidst intense socio-political conflict and state violence e.g. (Lykes, 2012, 2014). It was born out of a need to understand the psychological impact of oppression and to develop a praxis that could empower marginalized communities.

The approach critiques traditional Western psychology for its individualistic, decontextualized, and objectifying perspectives. Instead, Liberation Psychology emphasizes a socially engaged, contextually grounded, and transformative praxis. This is particularly crucial in Latin America, where historical and ongoing issues such as colonialism, state violence, and socio-economic inequality continue to impact collective well-being.

Research on Liberation Psychology is growing, with the majority of studies focusing on the Americas, particularly Latin America. This indicates its continued relevance in the region, addressing specific concerns of psychologists working with communities affected by various forms of oppression.

The study highlights that many individuals and communities in Latin America experience overlapping forms of marginalization, such as being part of a racialized minority, living in poverty, and facing the effects of conflict and violence (Mitton, 2023). Liberation

Psychology offers a framework that understands these interconnected experiences and focuses on addressing the structural causes of oppression.

5.2. Global Relevance and Applicability

While rooted in Latin America, Liberation Psychology has expanded its influence to other regions, including New Zealand and Uganda, e.g. (Liu et al., 2014; Lindorfer, 2009). Its principles—a new horizon, a new epistemology, and a new praxis—are adaptable to diverse contexts of oppression.

The core tenets of Liberation Psychology, such as its focus on social justice, human rights, and community empowerment, make it applicable in any context where systemic oppression and inequality exist. Its emphasis on collective trauma, community support, and challenging dominant narratives has become increasingly significant in a world facing various forms of conflict, displacement, and social injustice.

Liberation Psychology highlights that trauma is not solely an individual experience but a collective one, shaped by social, political, and historical contexts. This perspective is crucial for understanding and addressing the psychological impact of events like state violence, colonialism, racism, and social inequalities. The emphasis on psychosocial approaches calls for interventions that go beyond individualistic medical models and address the social and political dimensions of trauma.

Despite its global reach, Liberation Psychology remains a minority approach, especially in regions where it is most relevant. It faces resistance from mainstream psychology, which is largely dominated by Western, individualistic frameworks.

The study raises the question of whether Liberation Psychology can be meaningfully implemented in Western societies, where it might be perceived as an "alien" psychology (López, 2013). This indicates a potential challenge to its acceptance within dominant academic

and professional circles. The critique of individualism inherent in Liberation Psychology also represents a significant departure from the traditional focus of Western psychology.

There is evidence of adaptation and integration of Liberation Psychology in Western contexts, particularly in the fields of community psychology and social justice. The growing number of studies from the Global North signals an increasing interest in its principles. This suggests that some Western scholars and practitioners recognize the limitations of traditional approaches and see value in the insights of Liberation Psychology.

A key aspect of Liberation Psychology, as identified in the reviewed reports, is the need to decolonize psychology, challenge the notion of scientific neutrality, and critically examine the biases of therapists. Researchers and practitioners are urged to explicitly define their political and ethical positions and to engage in culturally sensitive practice. The recognition of power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship and a call for therapists to be present and engaged, not neutral, also point to a need to move away from purely medicalized and individualistic approaches.

5.3. Moving Forward

The study emphasizes the importance of participatory research, which is grounded in the lived experiences of the oppressed (Piper, 2008). It calls for interventions that prioritize active listening, witnessing, and validation, and the creation of safe spaces for victims to share their stories.

Community and collective action are highlighted as crucial for effective interventions (Diab et al., 2020). Restoring community ties, fostering relational reliance, and encouraging collective support are essential in addressing the collective nature of trauma.

Liberation Psychology underscores the necessity of addressing the root causes of violence and oppression by tackling the social, political, and economic structures that

perpetuate inequality (Zolnikov et al., 2023). This includes understanding and challenging the “institutionalization of lies” through conscientization and de-ideologization.

Ultimately, the study argues for a radical transformation in theory and practice, advocating for a move beyond individualistic, medicalized approaches toward models that integrate social justice, cultural relevance, and community participation . The future of psychology, according to Liberation Psychology, lies in its ability to address the interconnectedness of personal suffering and societal structures, and in the empowerment of marginalized communities to become agents of change.

5.4. Limitations

This study faces several limitations, primarily due to Liberation Psychology's status as a minority approach. In many regions where it is most relevant, such as Latin America, the field lacks widespread institutional support and funding. As a result, existing literature in this region is limited and often concentrated around the same core phenomena, primarily developed by a small group of key scholars. While this demonstrates expertise and commitment to the field, it also restricts the diversity of perspectives.

Another significant limitation is the transferability of findings across cultural settings, as Liberation Psychology currently finds applicability primarily in work with marginalized communities, which itself is often underfunded. Furthermore, the approach's emphasis on intersectionality resists rigid categorizations, making it difficult to generalize or define in fixed terms. However, its strength lies in recognizing the singularity of lived experiences and its grassroots nature. Additionally, the study acknowledges the challenge of maintaining perceived scientific neutrality in politically engaged research. While Liberation Psychology explicitly rejects the idea of value-free science—positioning all research as inherently political—this stance can further isolate it from mainstream academic discourse.

Methodological constraints also impact the study. The literature search was limited to English and Spanish sources, excluding many relevant articles published in Portuguese, which were inaccessible due to language barriers. While Spanish sources were interpreted by the bilingual author, this could pose a challenge for future researchers attempting to replicate the study. Additionally, for practical reasons, only three databases (Scopus, APA PsycInfo, and Redalyc) were used, which may have resulted in the omission of relevant studies found in other sources.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has explored the origins, development, and impact of Liberation Psychology, revealing its profound significance as both a response to specific historical contexts and a globally relevant framework for understanding and addressing oppression and trauma. Rooted in the socio-political upheavals of Latin America, particularly in El Salvador, this approach emerged as a necessary response to the psychological consequences of systemic violence and the need to empower marginalized communities. By addressing the deep interconnections between psychological well-being and social, political, and economic structures, Liberation Psychology offers an alternative to dominant psychological paradigms.

Unlike traditional Western psychology, which often adopts an individualistic, decontextualized, and objectifying perspective, Liberation Psychology emphasizes a socially engaged, contextually grounded, and transformative praxis. It challenges the notion that psychological distress can be understood in isolation from historical and structural realities, advocating instead for an approach that prioritizes social justice and community empowerment. By shifting how psychological knowledge is acquired and applied, this framework recognizes that healing and liberation are inseparable from the broader struggle for human rights.

The key findings of this review highlight several critical themes. First, Liberation Psychology underscores the importance of context in understanding trauma and oppression. Psychological suffering cannot be detached from the historical, social, and political forces that shape it, including state violence, political repression, and structural inequalities. Similarly, trauma is not solely an individual phenomenon but a collective experience that extends across generations. As such, interventions must move beyond purely individualistic models toward comprehensive, multi-level approaches that address the social and cultural dimensions of suffering.

Furthermore, Liberation Psychology calls for a new praxis in psychological work—one that prioritizes the needs and voices of marginalized populations. This involves participatory research, active listening, and the creation of safe spaces where communities can reclaim their narratives and exercise agency over their healing. Community and collective action are essential components of this process, as restoring social bonds, fostering relational reliance, and encouraging mutual support are key to addressing collective trauma.

Another fundamental aspect of Liberation Psychology is its emphasis on empowerment and agency. Rather than viewing individuals as passive victims, this approach recognizes them as active participants in their own recovery. Interventions should therefore focus on helping individuals reclaim their identities, challenge oppressive discourses, and work towards self-determination. This empowerment also extends to the rejection of scientific neutrality; Liberation Psychology argues that trauma work is inherently political, requiring psychologists and researchers to explicitly acknowledge their ethical and political positions in order to effect meaningful change.

While Liberation Psychology has expanded its influence beyond Latin America to regions such as Ireland and South Africa, it remains a minority approach, particularly in contexts where it is most needed. Its principles of social justice, human rights, and community empowerment are universally applicable, yet it continues to face resistance from mainstream psychological institutions, which often prioritize apolitical, individual-centred models.

The future of psychology, as envisioned by Liberation Psychology, depends on its ability to bridge personal suffering with systemic structures of oppression. This requires a radical transformation in both theory and practice, moving beyond individualistic, medicalized approaches and embracing models that integrate social justice, cultural relevance, and community participation. Ultimately, Liberation Psychology seeks not only to heal but to

empower, equipping marginalized communities with the tools to challenge oppressive systems and work towards more just and equitable societies.

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