Approaches to social work from a decolonialist and intersectional perspective: A Latin American and Caribbean view.

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**Introduction**

 In this chapter, I assert that intersectionality and decolonialist thought confront the knowledge and practices of social work that have developed from hegemonic knowledge. This dominant knowledge has nurtured many of the theories, methods, techniques, and practices that have been taught and reproduced in Latin American and Caribbean professional activity. In many places, these practices have been uncritically and ahistorically adopted in the form of so-called “professional intervention,” conceptualizing social work with those who live in Latin America and the Caribbean based on knowledge that was developed outside of our realities. Decoloniality and intersectionality are presented as a way of conceiving of our professional projects outside of the pattern of modern colonialism’s power. These approaches require certain aspects to be radicalized (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

 Social work from a decolonialist and intersectional perspective maintains a constant view towards the social conditions that allow and perpetuate oppressions, as well as the objective of developing professional counterparts and approaches that allow us to understand, confront, and eradicate them. From professional training in social work to all areas of the profession’s field and attributes, assuming counterhegemonic and anti-oppressive practices is recommended, positioned outside of European modernity and always situated within our Latin American realities.

This chapter is positioned in an analytic and contextual mapping marked by the realities of Latin American and Caribbean geography and history as we live it, suffer in it, and survive it—not as it has been told to us. Desde ese lugar, será la base del pensar situado y ubicado, el locus de la mirada la génesis del pensar. Decolonialist thought regarding the profession within Latin America and the Caribbean is carried out in the way that has been outlined by Bautista, and it “implies a transcendence of modern ontology and the modernity-postmodernity project” (pág. 84).

Through this decolonial approach, we will attempt to illuminate the logic that has structured economic, social, political, and gender-based relationships in Latin America and the Caribbean, and that are precisely the spaces in which social work frames its professional practice, working with materiality of the effects produced by coloniality in “bodies, lives, plans, and possibilities” (Hermida & Meschini, 2017). In this approach, intersectionalities are adopted as an essential element of the so-called decolonial turn that requires us to assume the impact of the multiplicity of identities. This is essential in a continent where the *mestizo* and the diverse are the rule rather than the exception. Finally, we present examples of decolonial turns that have been put into practice in Latin American and Caribbean social work in order to carry out professional activity.

**Coloniality**

The decolonial category was coined by the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality Group with three principal subcategories: **The coloniality of power**, **the coloniality of knowledge**, and **the coloniality of being** with a variety of intellectuals, most notably Santiago Castro-Gómez, Enrique Dussel, Ramón Grosfoguel, Edgardo Lander, María Lugones, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter Mignolo, and Aníbal Quijano. From different schools of thought and epistemic influences, this group was influenced by the thinking of Césaire, Memmi, Fanon, and by Dussel’s philosophy of liberation, among other theorists (Maldonado-Torres, 2011).

Coloniality is not the same as colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Aníbal Quijano (2015) defines coloniality as a constituent element of the global pattern of capitalist power founded in the imposition of an ethno-racial classification of the world population as the backbone of this pattern of power. The author situates the genesis and the globalization of this pattern of power in the the conquest of the Americas. According to the majority of authors of the decolonial turn, it is the conquest of the Americas that causes capitalist power to become global, localizing its hegemonic centers in Europe. When we speak of the decolonial, we are of course referring mainly to colonialism, but viewed and analyzed as a social grammar (Santos, 2010) in different social relationships.

 According to Quijano, although political colonialism has been eliminated, colonialism persists in other relationships. This includes colonialization of the imagination of those who are dominated. She understands that there was a repression that was passed onto beliefs, ideas, images, symbols, and knowledge, and that from there it extended onto ways of understanding, of producing knowledge, perspective, images, systems of images, symbols, and modes of significance. La dominación también cubrió los recursos los patrones e instrumentos de expresión. The effect of this control was that it impeded cultural production and controlled it both socially and culturally. This domain took place through the imposition of patterns of knowledge production and the colonizers’ definitions (Quijano A. , 1992).

**The coloniality of power**

The coloniality of power is defined by Quijano (2015) as a web of articulated social relationships of exploitation, domination, and conflict, fundamentally under the control of labor and its product; nature and its resources of production; sex, its products, and the reproduction of the species; subjectivity and its material and intersubjective products, including knowledge; and authority and its tools of coercion. This final point is often seen as a way of ensuring that the pattern of social relationships is reproduced, and that its changes can be regulated (Quijano A. , 2015). According to Quijano, social classification is essential in this pattern of power. These classifications create a system of distinctions by radical lines that divide social reality into two universes: some find themselves on one side of the line and others are on the other side. However, the oppressed populations and groups that are on the other side of the line disappear as a reality and become non-existent in any relevant or comprehensible way of being. They therefore find themselves excluded, or in the words of Iris Marion Young, “marginalized” (Young, 1990, p. 53). Marginalization produces dependence, which, in turn, results in unjust conditions.

According to de Sousa Santos (2015), these classifications create a system of visible and invisible distinctions that are established through radical lines that create exclusion. This allows for the creation of groups that are not candidates for “social inclusion” (pág. 28). He suggests that these classifications create a social apartheid, a contractual fascism, a territorial fascism, and a social fascism (De Sousa Santos, 2015). Social apartheid is visualized in the areas set aside for impoverished sectors that are commonly called poor and marginalized. In Puerto Rico, they are called *caseríos*, *residenciales*, or *barriadas pobres* (“poor neighborhoods”). In other parts of Latin America, we see different impoverished settlements with different names used to classify them. The zones are the ones most often indicated as dangerous and subjected to multiple social control “interventions.” In many cases of professional social work, they are used to carry out interventions as part of the mechanisms of state control and repression against these populations.

Contractual fascism occurs as a product of the asymmetry of power, when the vulnerable sectors have no alternative but to cope with the insecurity that is imposed on them by those in power (De Sousa Santos, 2015). This can be observed in the privatization of services such as health and education. Latin America and the Caribbean have established institutional and political reforms for structural adjustment, administrative decentralization, reducing the economy’s role, and responsibility in the development of social programming (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2008).

El fascismo territorial ocurre cuando actores sociales con capital disputan el control sobre los territorios capturan a las instituciones regulando los habitantes sin su participación y contra sus intereses (De Sousa Santos, 2015). Displacement and the repression of communities for the control and exploitation of natural resources is not uncommon in Latin America. It is also not rare for communities to become sick and contaminated as the result of business and governmental practices. Expropriations, the assassinations of community and environmental leaders, and the repression of protests and movements of people defending their land are commonplace in these territories.

According to De Souza (2015), all of these practices produce a kind of social fascism that impedes access to citizenry. The coloniality of power produces exclusion. It infringes upon the ideologies of social justice. It oppresses individuals and peoples. Helio Gallardo (2015) identifies large agrarian and masculine property, patriarchal-authoritarian Catholicism, and ethnic-Eurocentric superiority as the initial forces that have driven social relations since the processes of invasion and colonization. The author asserts that all of these driving forces carry extreme and discrimination, criminal characteristics, and legitimized violence in absolute terms. He posits that a judicial impunity exists that has sustained these violences and that it arrived at the time of the invasion, was strengthened over time, and divided with independence. Furthermore, even in countries with left-wing projects, the coloniality of power over sex and its products works against their advanced projects with regard to economic rights. There are self-proclaimed left-wing governments with repressive agendas against women’s rights and the LGBTTQI community.

And it is here that we question the role of social work in the perpetuation of hegemonic power. According to Quijano:

…it is this distribution of power among people of a society that classifies them socially, determines their reciprocal relationships, and generates their social differences, since their empirically observable and distinguishable characteristics are the result of those relationships of power, their signals, and their traces (Quijano A. , 2015, p. 92).

In the words of Hermida and Meschini (2017), by situating social work in a decolonial perspective, we are in the intersections where collegiality becomes materiality in order to become a wound that marks bodies, lives, plans, and possibilities. I agree with them in that these wounds have faces, names, and bodies. They are nations, they are groups, they are communities.

These groups shoulder roles that are assigned to and imposed upon their sex, their sexual orientation, their skin color, their political affiliation, and the community in which they live. It is the trans woman that does not have health coverage to pay for her hormone treatment. They are the communities in Honduras who have to travel more than six hours to reach a hospital. They are the Nicaraguans deprived of social security by a government that ironically calls itself “left-wing.” They are the immigrant children separated from their families who feel forced to abandon their countries to seek out dreams that seem impossible in their native lands. They are the people on the other side of the line whom, in many cases, we do not see due to our privilege and position outside of their context and whom, if we see them, we work to make them respect the border so they do not cross it. We collaborate to ensure that these groups internalize this oppression, creating a colonial legacy (Lander, 2000).

In many of our countries, we see social workers working for agencies that perpetuate the colonial legacy. This can be observed in the sectoral work that is carried out in some communities, primarily through non-governmental organizations and the ambiguous third sector in its role to obscure social movements that worked toward the transformation of social conditions (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2008; Montaño, 2005). Precisamente, Petras y Veltmeyer (2008). These activities, developed by national organizations, focused on breaking up the social movements that arose out of the lines of exclusion to work against power structures. Third-sector organizations and civil society did not operate against the structure; they operated from within it and were financed by it. Their activity was reduced to small-scale projects to alleviate poverty without substantial social change in the distribution of or access to national and local resources. The local focus caused the national resources to dissociate and did not push for radical change. The intention was, therefore, to keep the existing power structure in the distribution of society’s resources while promoting change and development on a local scale (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2008). Or, in my own words, a cover-up of the manifestations of social issues.

**The coloniality of knowledge**

The coloniality of knowledge implies the imposition and transmission of forms of knowledge developed by the European historical experience as the only valid, objective, and universal forms of knowledge (Lander, 2000). This has resulted in a cultural and epistemological colonization that hegemonizes the European system of representation and knowledge and the European perspective (Gómez-Quintero, 2010). According to Dussel, the educational process of modernity is based on European superiority (Dussel, 2010). He calls this the myth of modernity. In order to overcome it, the other’s otherness must be claimed. For Castro Gomez (2007), this can be achieved by favoring transdisciplinarity, la transgresión del dos lejos de los pares binarios del pensamiento occidental de la modernidad, la transculturalidad el diálogo y las prácticas articulatorias con conocimientos excluidos. The author challenges us to replace purity and distance with contamination and closeness, starting from zero, with the observer forming an integral part of that which he or she observes as part of the experiment. This is disruptive and counterhegemonic, and this is what Martínez and Agüero call indiscipline (2014).

Analyzing Wallerstein, Castro Gómez (2010) postulates that an epistemic violence took place in the social sciences, in which discipline was key in the project of organization and control of human life. This “science,” according to the author, legitimized the regulatory practices of the State that were based on adjusting human life to production. The challenge for social sciences and for social work as a discipline of these sciences:

consists of learning to name the whole without falling prey to the essentialism and universalism of meta-narratives. This entails the difficult work of reimagining the tradition of *critical theory* (that of Lukács, Bloch, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Sartre, and Althusser) in light of post-modern theorization but, at the same time, of reimagining the latter in light of the former. It is not, therefore, about buying new wineskins and throwing out the old ones, nor is it about throwing out new wine in old wineskins; rather, it is about reconstructing the old wineskins so that they can hold new wine. (Castro-Gómez, 2010, pág. 158)

The discussion of how to overcome the coloniality of knowledge emphasizes the need to develop a new language that reveals the complexity of the processes that take place in the modern-colonial-patriarchal-capitalist world-system, working outside of the Eurocentric social science language and providing an alternative language (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007).

It also evokes the need for a decolonial turn that aims to reveal dominant knowledge, identifying the knowledge and practices that are based on a colonial legacy. This knowledge is distorted and wrong (Masías-Núñez, 2011). Decolonial theorists propose a global network of power made up of economic, political, and cultural processes that transcend capitalism and that, together, maintain the entire system:

Therefore, we need to find new concepts and a new language that account for the complexity of the hierarchies of gender, race, class, sexuality, knowledge, and spirituality within the geopolitical, geocultural, and geoeconomic processes of the world-system. With the goal of finding a new language for this complexity, we must search “outside” of our paradigms, disciplinary focuses, and areas of knowledge. We need to engage in dialogue with non-Western forms of knowledge that see the world as a whole in which everything is related to everything, but also with new theories (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007, pág. 17).

It is essential that we ask ourselves: Which of the elements of knowledge that nourish social work as a profession and an academic discipline attempt to approach the issues of the profession from these hegemonic views? How is hegemonic knowledge reflected in the paradigms, theories, models, methods, and techniques that we use in the profession? What role do universities and social work programs play in the reproduction of a single form of knowledge or in the subjugation of knowledge that conflict with the values of our profession?

In some debates it worries me to hear social work professionals speak of neutral positions. Doctor Raquel Seda, one of the most renowned social workers in Puerto Rico, wondered how it was possible to exercise the profession in in accordance with her values, from the perspective of an education with conservative focuses, and still orient ourselves to remain neutral. According to her, positioning ourselves as political subjects is an indispensable task. Similarly, it suggests that it is possible to be objective within subjectivity, but that this was achieved through liberating educational processes, willpower, and discipline (Seda-Rodríguez, 2012). Being neutral usually implies silence. Silence in the face of oppression, in the face of rights denied to collectives that are sexually diverse, in the face of continual discrimination sustained against women and femicide, in the face of our governments massacring our populations and depriving us the rights inherent to our humanity.

Let us reflect upon our practices and the knowledge that underlies them. The proliferation and the indiscriminate use of the term “based on the evidence” concerns me as a perpetuation and application of the one-size-fits-all model for populations that experience certain problems. It seems fundamental and part of an ethical practice to seek out available knowledge, and to inform our practices with this knowledge. However, it is an act of violence to apply the practices and models without consideration for the history and context of the participants who interact in this professional exercise. My concern stems from the lack of critical rigor that can be observed in many of our work experiences.

There is no shortage of instances in which our knowledge and practices are colored by concepts foreign to the reality that people live, their needs, and the critical analysis of the social positions that serve as its base. Without this, we reproduce colonial practices. To use an example from the coloniality of knowledge, there is the situation that we face in the clinical and therapeutic practices of social work with the use of the Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, known as the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This document pathologizes women’s menstrual periods, the processes of mourning, and inherent aspects of child development. In many cases, the professionals who have a clinical practice are often forced to enter into diagnostic categories principally designed by psychiatrists in order to pathologize and treat as illnesses issues that are emotional consequences of social stressors. Horwitz (2002) indicates the important sociological duty of distinguishing between what could actually be a mental illness and what are expected reactions to social stressors. The author specifies that there is nothing pathological in people responding to situations that affect them with depression, anxiety, or other symptoms of tension and anguish. Netto (2002) denounces the State strategy to break down the social issue by uncoupling social problems from one another, emphasizing the private dimension of these factors. Therefore, the professional exercise is focused on behavior change, psychosocial discipline, and other interventions that perpetuate inequality—interventions that constitute a clear contradiction with the principles of the profession.

**The coloniality of being**

 The coloniality of being is defined as the lived experience of colonialization and its impact on language, connecting different genetic, existential, and historical levels (2007). Nelson Maldonado explains that the colonized being’s primary expressions are invisibility and dehumanization, violating the sense of human otherness. It is the act of not being. Maldonado also argues that gender, race, and sexuality are forms in which the relationship between the self and the other are most often transgressed. Provoca que se haga a la otra inferior que los sujetos vayan más allá de los estándares de la justicia in order to substitute their own bodies with dehumanization at the expense of their own death.

 It seems that we must be concerned with and problematize concepts that become famous such as that of “resilience,” and that on many occasions natural sciences are introduced and applied indiscriminately to our profession. While it is admirable that people are able to confront and overcome adversity, we must observe how this concept begins to be used by groups in power to reinforce the idea that people must demonstrate acceptance of adverse situations. And, therefore, far from being a concept that emphasizes the ways in which people and groups overcome, call into question, and organize themselves against adversity, it becomes a concept of resignation. Its passivity in relation to the situation makes them “resilient,” when in reality it denies them their basic rights, and thus their own existence. It transform them into non-beings.

It is here that intersectionality becomes a tool of practice in the decolonial turn. In all expressions of coloniality that I have highlighted, there is a common theme: hegemony, categories, distinctions, oppression. A division of those who are on one side and those who are on others. It is the abysmal line proposed by De Souza Santos (2015), where everything that is not compatible with the notion of universality and naturalness becomes invisible and oppressed as a result of hegemonic power.

The approach that we take from the perspective of the profession requires us to put aside binary pairs in order to think of the range of possibilities that exist between the poles. We can no longer talk about sexual orientation and think only of a gay man or a lesbian. Between these lines there is a diversity of different expressions of sexuality that must also be considered. Each of these expressions has different impacts and nuances people’s identities and knowledge.

Intersectionality as an approach highlights two categories of identity (Crenshaw, 1991) that are negated and made invisible by the substrates of colonialization imprinted on all categories of oppression. Intersectionality allows us to analyze power in all of its domains—interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural—combatting inequality anywhere it is found. Social divisions of race, gender, age, and citizenship status cause the impacts to have different implications according to the intersecting identities of people and groups. This complicates the situation for professional exercise because the solutions cannot be applied in a simple way. We must embrace complex approaches.

This implies a conscious and critical social work practice of social inequality and its causes. It also implies the understanding of the different ways in which they are organized and exercise their power. Add to this the promotion of solidarity and human relationships, organizing people participating in emancipatory processes based on their identities, and, finally, the contextual professional and scholarly exercise of the historical processes associated with the difficulties and situations with which we work.

**Decolonial examples in Latin American and Caribbean work**

For Latin America and the Caribbean, the decolonial project of social work began with the Reconceptualization Movement. This movement can be analyzed as a process of breakdown (Aquín, 2005), which was itself the product of a series of questioning, revisions, and searches that were based on the study of the Latin American reality, underdevelopment, and economic dependence (Kiserman, 2005). The basis of the professional exercise of social work that had taken place until that point had been questioned and transformed, as were the institutional establishments in which they were carried out. All of this was compounded with a political radicalization of the profession and the removal of what had been, until that moment, ideological perspectives, theories, and social work methods that did not correspond to the reality of what was being lived in our territories. This produced a Latin American and Caribbean identity for social work that was considerably detached from the social work that had been carried out up to the point and that was conceived principally by the pioneers of the profession. During this time, the category of decoloniality had not been identified, but the movement represented a decolonial turn in the exercise of the profession in Latin America.

The second milestone was the organization of the project for the region by the social work professional organizations (Martínez & Agüero, 2018). Mercosur, the Latin American and Caribbean Committee of Social Work/Social Service (COLACATS) and the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) for the Latin American and Caribbean region have had an impact on the global definition of social work, the defense of the profession’s identity in the region, the political struggle in international spaces, and the decolonization of social work worldwide. The election of the first Latin American as president of the global IFSW, Dr. Silvana Martínez, is one of the results of the region’s collective work. For Latin American and Caribbean social work, the disruptive, decolonial, and counter-hegemonic perspective can be found in our identifying features, which include:

the historical, political, and holistic view of social issues; the politicization of the profession, the centrality of the State in the construction and reproduction of the social order; the relationship between the profession and social movements; the Social Workers’ capacity for struggle and resistance and the familiarity with the working class tied to the precarity of the working conditions of the professional exercise (Martínez & Agüero, 2018, pág. 43).

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