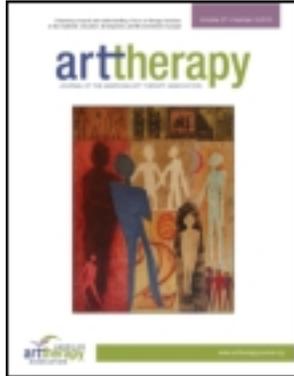


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Reviews

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reviews

Towards Psychologies of Liberation

by Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman

New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008,
(2010, paperback)

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408 pp.

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Reviewed by Janis Timm-Bottos, Montreal, QC,
Canada

Art therapists may hear their “calling” after reading Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman’s outstanding book, *Towards Psychologies of Liberation*. This coauthored text traverses a refreshingly different geography of psychology that goes beyond universals and ideologies and crosses into many underrepresented landscapes. As the book progresses the authors noticeably use less Western psychological terminology while carefully retrieving and constructing a new language to articulate a cultural grassroots phenomenon. Throughout my archetypal art therapy education and the years that followed, during which I developed community art studio practices, imaginal psychologist Mary Watkins has remained one of my most influential authors. This densely layered book, requiring several readings, continues imparting the wisdom readers have come to expect from Watkins and her equally powerful coauthor, Helene Shulman. Their guidance is relevant to art therapists’ evolving practices, to psychology’s transformation, and to a future of globalizing wellness.

The book is organized into four parts:

Part I: Compass Points. The orientation and theories of liberation theologian Ignacio Martín-Baró underpin this text, starting with the premise that psychology needs a new goal, a new epistemology, and a new praxis. In this section, the authors remind us that even those who live within privileged communities are affected by the distresses of youth suicide, drug and alcohol dependence, mindless consumption, loneliness, and profound experiences of meaninglessness. In this sense we all need liberation psychologies to help understand our suffering. The authors also question the continuation of an unexamined developmental model of psychology. “The term ‘development’ has too often covered over the experience of inequality and dependence that has been generated by others’ economic gain” (2008, p. 35).

Part II: Psychic Wounds of Colonialism and Globalization. In the second part, the authors describe the importance of cultivating awareness regarding how much of our “most intimate psychological orientation and suffering are connected with the historical and cultural contexts in

which we live” (p. 49). These contexts include the effects of “the weight of un mourned violence” (p. 50) hidden within the stresses of war, colonialism, hegemony, and globalization. They begin this section by painting a lesser known history of how psychoanalysis entered the United States. Against Freud’s wishes, the practice of psychoanalysis gave up its commitment to social justice and free health clinics and adopted medicalized practices. This section ends with a very sobering and empowering chapter, “Mourning and Witness after Collective Trauma,” which is relevant to any therapist involved in trauma work.

Part III: Springs for Creative Restoration. The third section describes some of the initial processes and philosophies that have arisen to meet the challenges confronting many teachers and therapists today. The authors introduce educator Paulo Freire and the creative tools associated with the Theatre of the Oppressed. As an art therapist and educator I have found these and other embodied methods of expression indispensable for helping myself and others see the past through an empathic lens, which invites a shared sense of vulnerability. This section appropriately ends with a chapter entitled “Dialogue,” which focuses on an often overlooked *listen and question practice* based in relationships built over time that extend an ethic of hospitality through kind regard. “Our questions hold the power to open doors or to close them, to challenge us to courageously forge new understandings or to take easy recourse to the already known,” Watkins and Shulman write (p. 204). “The craft of creating questions that invite the complexities of experience and new insight is a fundamental skill in the dialogical processes common to psychologies of liberation” (p. 204).

Part IV: Participatory Practices of Liberation Psychologies. This final section documents restorative projects that historically and currently are sites of liberation. Examples are Chicago’s Hull House, Highlander Citizenship Schools of the South, Zapatista communities in Mexico, and the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka. Watkins and Shulman write, “This is work that surpasses what individual or family therapy can provide, requiring a larger setting than a consulting room” (p. 230). The work has back and forth rhythms of critical self-reflection, as we then reach out to others. It promotes an unusual “commitment to host the unhomely within ourselves” (Bhabha, as cited in Watkins and Shulman, 2008, p. 231) with “an ethics of discomfort” (Foucault, as cited in Watkins and Shulman, 2008, p. 231) in order to recover lost histories and welcome marginalized voices from within and from around us. New thinking about psychology is explored in detail in the first four chapters in this section, and three powerful methodologies representing the underlying philosophical basis of liberation psychology are offered as follows:

Public Homeplace. The authors name the importance of communal gathering sites that range from temporary social spaces, which nourish facilitated processes of reconciliation, to special places, such as the citizenship schools during the civil rights movement. In each, a community gathers to understand and implement change. Watkins explained that she works with public homeplace as “a social space that is convened where dialogue can occur, where the arts flourish as a means of expression, where critical consciousness is developed in order that members can imaginatively and actually transform their world” (personal communication, October 19, 2009). The authors’ definition also fits more established sites such as the free community art studios in which I have worked. In these small, “bus-stop” public homeplaces, participants who may not have a home or a job and may not know one another gather together to improve their own or each other’s well-being within a framework of a larger social or environmental endeavor. Utilizing a variety of primarily recycled art materials, participants begin to imagine a world that could support everyone, especially those least supported in the current systems (Timm-Bottos, 2005). As Watkins put it:

As a homeplace develops it tends to those who are most vulnerable, conserving the best values of ‘home.’ It takes care to include all voices, giving a variety of means of expression. Many public homeplaces take care to be intergenerational, to develop relationships with other such groups, and to link with allies from the wider community who may live in different social locations. (personal communication, October 19, 2009)

Liberation Arts. “Liberation arts” is a new term coined by Helene Shulman, who embraces the concept as a way of putting power “in the hands of communities, away from experts and elites, as a mode of communication midway between art therapy and professional art work, but also perhaps in conversation with them about art modalities” (personal communication, October 19, 2009). Liberation arts methodologies provide community members access to a philosophy and a practice that is an essential path to democratic processes. Watkins and Shulman state, “By breaking down the walls between arts creators and art spectators, liberation arts begin processes of dialogue and imagination that strengthen individuals and communities to

engage their past, present, and future” (2008, p. 264). Art making, music making, dance, altar building, storytelling, theatre practices, photography, radio, and film are each described as tools of liberation. Their chapter on liberation arts ends by describing general characteristics of liberation arts which “exports methodologies of art therapy from the clinic to the community” (p. 256).

Critical Participatory Action Research and Ethics. These two interconnected themes introduce emancipatory methods of research that recall an era when inquiry was not separate from everyday life and was often “accomplished through oral traditions and art, rather than writing and formalized research” (p. 270). What might be surprising, however, is that these processes of inquiry have also been shown to be therapeutic and restorative because of the centrality of human ethics and advocacy within the research. The researcher is asked to look for who is being affected and address the structural causes of the situation being studied. “When we reflect on proposals for research, we need to ask ourselves who through the process of research is likely to gain power, knowledge, and the capacity to transform the world” (p. 276).

“Culture Contains the Seed of Resistance that Blossoms into the Flower of Liberation” is the title of a garage door mural painted by Miranda Bergman and O’Brien Tiele in Balmy Alley, San Francisco. This is the image fittingly chosen for the front and back covers of Watkins and Shulman’s inspiring book. The authors ask the reader to critically rethink psychology. In turn, art therapists need to revision our own profession from a critical, a cultural, and a geographical perspective. I highly recommend this book for all art therapy practitioners, students of art therapy, and especially art therapy educators who are seeking ways of discussing our evolving profession. *Towards Psychologies of Liberation* shines colorful beacons of light and possibilities for the liberation of our collective professional imaginations.

Reference

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