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## **Critical Construction of Psychology in Colombia<sup>2</sup>**

One of the main characteristics of Critical Psychology is the recognition of its fundamentals and reflexivity. For this reason, it is not possible to begin this paper ignoring some methodological aspects that determined the process of construction of this text. Critical Psychology appeared in Colombia at the end of the 1990's. The brief history of the field brought forth a set of limitations when it was time to locate the sources and references that would be used in writing this article. The principal obstacle was finding and using all of the pertinent information and available contacts in the field. Nevertheless, gathering the information for the preparation of this document was completed by Psychology and Social Psychology investigators who worked in groups that were generated since 2004 by the Colombian Association of Faculties of Psychology. As a consequence, it is possible that some information, a group, an investigator or a research project has not been taken into account in composing this text, a fact that does not suppose a conscious omission in any of the cases. On the contrary, it can be understood as evidence of an academic community, which is not so well established, arising under the name of *critic* and needing encounter niches.

### **EMERGING OF CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY IN COLOMBIA**

The history of Critical Psychology in Colombia can be explained from two perspectives. The first one is related to the preparation of the field of knowledge that could make the identification, assimilation and installation of the main contents of the field possible. From this perspective, one can mention the crisis of Social Psychology in the 70's (Gergen, 1973), the development of Political and Communitarian Psychology in Latin America (Martí-Baró, 1983; 1989; 1990; Montero, 1987; 2004), the schools of post-structuralism thought, the sociology of knowledge (Bloor, 1998; Latour, 1993; Dómenech y Tirado, 1998) and the comprehensive and participative methodologies as conditions of theoretical possibility for the existence of the critical discipline in Colombia. The presence of contents such as socio-constructivism, participative investigation-action, relations between power and knowledge, social political and armed conflict of Colombia, ethical and political dimensions of knowledge, and reflexivity, among others, lead to the construction of the proper scenario to talk about Critical Psychology in a specific moment in the country which was in the year 2000.

Although the collection of themes and theoretical premises cited previously were included in studies of Social Psychology in Colombia (references Colciencias), it was only in the year 2000 when a work linked to Critical Psychology was established in an explicit way. It is about a book concerning planning strategies within the perspective of gender that Estrada expected

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to work on (2000). Later on, in 2002, the group of Social and Critical Psychology of the Universidad de los Andes, also headed by Estrada, was recognized by the National System of Science and Technology. In the same way, during the first lustrum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at least seven research groups that adhere to the fundamentals of Critical Psychology have been consolidated. These groups are: (a) Popular Education of the Universidad del Valle; (b) Critical Studies of the Organizations and the work of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana; (c) Social and Cultural ties of Peace of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana; (d) Urban and Esthetics and Socialities of the Universidad San Buenaventura; (e) Analysis and psychosocial transformation of the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana; (f) Cognition and Human development of the Universidad of Manizales; and (g) Theoretical and practical studies on critical Psychology of the Universidad Cooperativa of Colombia of Cali.

The second perspective that has to be taken into consideration in order to understand Critical Psychology in Colombia refers to the origins of the concerns that led researchers to join this field. The first interest was the search for theoretical and methodological alternatives on the side of those who were educated in Psychology and in the Social Sciences during the crisis of the 70's; apart from participating in a Colombian context of political and social unrest. Estrada describes that moment as follows:

*'It was the decade of the 1970's and Marx and Lenin's ideologies were trendy, the idealization of the armed struggle as an alternative towards political and economical change, as well as movements of counter-culture as important as the one of the liberation of woman and the hippies. All the cultural environment challenged the Social Sciences and particularly Psychology to cultivate a perspective about the disturbing demands and complaints and called it to abandon the naïve attitude about the neutrality of Science, the objectivity of scientific knowledge and the universality of the knowledge of the Social Sciences' (Estrada, 2005: 13)*

The search for alternatives facing the dominant paradigm that is expressed in positivism, led some researchers to take distance from the scientific conventional procedures and gradually approach the proposals that did not necessarily come from Psychology. The principal questions that emerged aimed at interrogating the neutrality of Science, objectivity of knowledge, and to propose the necessity of incorporating local and historical elements to research and theoretical practice. Social Psychology was the first niche in which the critical postulates were received in Colombia specifically under the types of Political Psychology, Communitarian Psychology and Psychology of Liberation. The theoretical platform of the socio-constructivism, the qualitative methodology for Psychology and the historical considerations of knowledge for Colombia in the Latin American framework were adopted under these kinds of psychology. Differences were marked by the objectives and the discipline to which the researcher belonged. However, the specificity of Critical Psychology helps to differentiate its concepts from those of the three branches of knowledge (Montero, 2004), though it has formally and explicitly appeared few years ago. Some of those differentiating features are the pragmatist premises, the reflexive practices and the consideration of the narratives as materials in the processes of investigation.

The result of these searches for new models of work resulted in a 20 year incubation period for Critical Psychology. This incubation took place within theories and practices of Social Psychology. The professorship of Social Psychology in some universities became a platform for the inclusion of contents such as the analysis of the relations of power, the trans-disciplinary use of concepts, the theory of gender, the ethno-methodology, the Latin American identity, the Latin American fatalism-presentism, the lack of asepsis of Science, the

rescue of the subjectivity before the crisis of objectivity, the post-structuralism, the recovering of significance as the basis of the collective relations, the ethic-theology of the liberation, the social dialectics, the subject's inquiry, the processes of ideologization and politicization, and reflexivity, only to take into account some of the most general topics. All these contents were carried out not only in Social Psychology courses, but also in other fields of study like Social Comprehensive Psychology, seminars of Political Psychology and, even in recent times, seminars of Critical (social) Psychology.

The answers to the theoretical, political, ethical and methodological questions that appeared in the 1970's found their place by means of institutionalization of Psychology in Colombia. Four indicators of this are the following: The constitution of specific groups of research with their corresponding publications; The existence of minimal conceptual referents shared among the critical psychologists in Colombia, a fact that allows the dialogue among them and their projects of investigation;<sup>3</sup> The specialized education on Critical Psychology of the first Colombian psychologists (Aceros, 20003; Molina, 2003; Pulido, 20002; Romero, 2004; Vargas, 2004) in the Universidad Autonoma of Barcelona in Spain, and in Western Sydney University in Australia and finally, the creation of the Node of Critical Psychology by the group of researchers from the Colombian Association of Faculties of Psychology with the initial membership of six groups of investigation.

Eventually, Social Psychology gradually became a theory of knowledge from which there were generated processes of investigation keeping its traditional contents, but following different philosophical arguments from those of the positivist canon. For this reason, Critical Psychology in Colombia has been attached to Social Psychology without this meaning a direct or functional relation *per se* that is not accepted by all the researchers in the field.

The discussion whether Critical Psychology is part of Social Psychology or not includes two topics. The first centers on the analysis of the social conditions. The other focuses on the existence of works from a critical approach that are not part of the conceptualization of Social Psychology. The debate clarifies that the social content of the critical nature is a specific characteristic of this kind of Psychology that does not correspond to Social Psychology directly. In second place, the contents of what is understood as Critical Psychology have leaked into other fields of knowledge appealing to psychologists, for instance, the cognitive field, family theories or organizational contexts. This discussion possibly constitutes the most important focus in the construction of the discipline among those investigators who are called critical psychologists in Colombia. In this fashion, the debate between the critical constituent and the role of the social in it remains open in the same way as the methodological controversy that underlies the present researches. The setting of these debates is part of the agenda of work of the Node of Critical Psychology that belongs to the group of researchers of the Colombian Association of Faculties of Psychology. In short, Psychology is being analyzed from a critical perspective that begins to overstep the theoretical and methodological foci of Social Psychology; Critical Psychology is defined as a field under construction.

## **THE TOPICS OF THE COLOMBIAN CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

The theoretical investigation and production of Critical Psychology in Colombia is characterized by direct connection to the specific issues facing the country and a refrain from making generalizations. It is about understanding a set of processes in diverse fields of

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<sup>3</sup> Bauman, 1997; Deleuze & Guattari, 2000; Domènech, 1998; Foucault, 1968, 1976, 1982, 1984; Gergen, 1994; Harrè & Grant, 1994; Ibáñez, 2001; Ibáñez & Iñiguez, 1997; Latour, 1993; Martín-Baró., 1983, 1989; Mouffe, 1998; Parker, 1998; Potter, 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Rorty, 1995; Rose 1996, 1999; Senneth, 2000; Serres, 1995; Shotton, 1993; Van Dijk, 2000; Vásquez, 2001; Walkerdine, 2002.

interest and social action in a specific and detailed way. These studies and works can be organized into four categories: (a) political and cultural topics; (b) organizational matters; (c) questions related to gender; and (d) socio-technological subjects (chart #1).

TOPICS	SPECIFIC TOPICS
<i>Political and cultural</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Colombian Political-armed struggle</li> <li>2. Subjectivity and political culture</li> <li>3. Social links and Culture of peace</li> <li>4. Participation</li> </ol>
<i>Organizations</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work subjectivities</li> <li>2. Flexibilization, work and globalization in Colombia</li> <li>3. Power in the organizations</li> </ol>
<i>Gender</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gender and racism</li> <li>2. Gender and community and peace</li> </ol>
<i>Socio-technology</i>	

**Chart #1.** Summary of the topics and the specific fields of study dealt by Critical Psychology in Colombia.

### ***Political and Cultural topics***

The political and cultural matters are derived from different topics. The first one of them is the analysis of the political-armed conflict in Colombia and the strategies of communitarian resistance as ways of transforming it. These works have conceived the conflict from a topologic view. A view which states that a conflict is the simultaneous presence of two or more plaintiffs that occupy the same space and that have a dispute over a common object which generates different interpretations. The processes of resistance emerged as a proactive and non-violent strategy that is able to transform the relations of domination imposed by the armed plaintiffs, regardless of their legal grounding. This set of practices supposes that communities take control of their own destiny, as well as the construction of policies of State controlled by the community itself and not only by the execution of public policies of the legislative governments. One of the main conclusions of this line of work is that communitarian resistance is taking its place as an effective alternative in order to transform conflict and render it independent from the processes of negotiations between the government and the rebel groups or paramilitaries in Colombia (Molina, 2004, 2004a).

The second topic refers to subjectivity and political culture. One of the characteristics of this line of research is the concern for the flow of relations between the intra-familiar violence and the armed conflict in Colombia. From this analysis one can recognize topics that allude directly to the examination of control of subjectivity in the political context of the country, mediated by violence. The features of this field of critical investigation depend on questions about the political culture and subjectivity in the Colombian and Latin American context, and at the same time they determine a qualitative look that involves gender (Estrada, 1995; Estrada, Ibarra & Sarmiento, 2003).

The social bonds and the culture of peace correspond to the third topic of the political and cultural matters of Critical Psychology in Colombia. This concern has been studied from four perspectives that are always connected to peace. These spheres are: political violence, construction of cultures, cultural practices of youngsters and groups, and understandings of peace. The understanding of the meanings and the transforming practices of conflicts

constitute the joining axis for these projects. These projects have also taken into account the production of and the oral history of the communities (displaced people by violence, students, business people, youngsters, etc.), the conditions of gender, the specific context of investigation near the city of Bogota and an outstanding interest in the processes of reflexivity among the investigators (Ballesteros, 2002; Sacipa, 2003; Tovar, 2003).

Participation as a political and cultural topic has been treated from two views. On the one hand, participation is conceived as a methodology; on the other hand, it is seen as an object of study from the category of participative behavior. The projects that have been carried out on the side of participation have fulfilled the education objectives, emancipating from the participative investigation-action and the psycho-social intervention. Coexistence is the topic that is derived from the different studies of participation. Therefore, coexistence is assumed as a matter of daily life from which democratic relations are meant to be strengthened and relations based on violence undone. In brief, Critical Psychology that approaches participation for coexistence aims to build specific social relations effective enough to change reality (Arango, 2001, 2003; Arango et. al. 2002).

### ***Organizational matters***

The first of the topics tackled from the organizational critical context is about work subjectivities. According to Rose (1988), Psychology is part of the nets of power (technologies) that connect the macro-economic politics, business management, design of work and human subjectivity. So, the organizations absorbed into a neo-liberal context faced imperatives to assure their survival, innovation, quality, service and efficiency. These imperatives tend to the flexible organizations that get adapted to the context via innovations and specifically to the requirements of the consumer who has more options to choose due to the increase of competence. Before these conditions of the context, human resources become a source of competitive advantage as the physical strength of the worker is not only the clue factor of production, but their subjectivity (intelligence, feelings, and wishes). Companies in this context require and produce certain kind of subjectivities; in this case, both cognitively (through innovation) and emotionally (considering that empathy is necessary for the interaction with the client) competent workers. In this way, the worker's subjectivity becomes fundamentally intertwined with the axis of production (Critical Studies of the Organizations and work - ECOT-, 2005).

The second subject, the approach related to flexibilization, work and globalization in Colombia, emerges from the observation of a tendency to transform the politics, practices and work speeches. This change can be associated to phenomena of global nature that provide the setting for the conditions of the internationalization of the economy in the contemporary world. These conditions can be grouped under the category, practices of work flexibilization and they respond to speeches on the necessity of changes in the organization of work and production; these modifications can answer to the vast competence of a global market. In the framework of critical tradition, the line of flexibilization sets questions that inquire into the ways of power that are displayed in the organizational spaces. The goal is to be in charge of stability, variation, naturalization or denature of the speeches and practices that constitute the phenomenon of work flexibilization in Colombia (ECOT, 2005).

In third place, the study focuses on the power within organizations and more specifically analyzing the mechanisms of power in companies. The structural theories of the organization correspond to the first referent to understand power as a hierarchical attribute that can only be held by some people. However, the concentration of power was not designed to remain among the heads of the structure and at the same time this would also be transformed.

Nevertheless, the changes were not significant because power was still being examined as a resource given to those who had staff hierarchically under their responsibility. The critical proposal suggests to understand power as an exercise, different from a resource, and to analyze it in the organizational processes regardless of the structure. This model recognizes power as a quality of social relations, but not of the structures; the sentence states a democratization of the organizational analysis by means of categories similar to collective or communitarian processes (Romero, 2004).

### ***QUESTIONS RELATED TO GENDER***

Gender as a theoretical category has two functions in the critical studies in Colombia. The first is that gender becomes a common subject of study. The second is to be defined as a category that is present in a huge number of studies and that regulates part of their methodological, ethical and political bases. In this way, some of the topics associated to gender keep a relation with others that have been cited in the text. This fact reveals the accomplishment of the second function previously mentioned.

The line of work on Gender and Racism describes an outlook that started with questions about the feminist anti-racism in Germany. Questions related to the political order and the construction of political individuals starting from a perspective of gender appeared (Obando, 2001). The collection of results of this work has stimulated projects about women's identities in mistreated girls in areas near and inside the city of Cali. The critical fundamentals of these works include participation, investigation-action methodology, and the consideration of gender in the explanatory theories of the studied phenomena. In this context it is not assumed a clear condition of truth and based on the stories of women the horizons of meaning are disclosed and known.

On the other hand, the works that have been placed into the category of gender and community (Estrada & Lizcano, 1999; Estrada & Botero, 2000; Estrada, Ibarra & Sarmiento, 2003; Sacipa 2003) focus upon the consequences of the armed conflict or structural conditions of the political and social situation in Colombia. These projects focus on the following phenomena: local female identities, supportive economy and female productivity, psycho-social effects of the armed conflict on women, private life in five municipalities where conflict exists in Colombia, and the issue of gender in different generations of families displaced by violence.

### ***SOCIO-TECHNOLOGY***

Young researchers are developing research agendas and publications on topics that are not very common in Psychology. They focus on socio-technological and symmetrical approaches (Domènech and Tirado, 1998) of collective phenomena. These investigations point out the beginning of the disappearance of the disciplinary frontiers where critical examinations become the base theory and does not refer to conceptual and methodological divergence. Aceros (2001) carried out a project in which he described the relationship between human and machines used in some surgical operations. The conclusions of this kind of relationship (human-machine) are an inevitable characteristic of the contemporary social reality while they challenge Psychology to make problematic its traditional way of studying behavior and considering mental processes. Based on this work, a conceptual field has opened up and nowadays it deals with topics such as social movements and their relation with the technologies of information and communication (TIC's), the processes of virtualization and the mechanisms of resistance with TIC's.

## ***METHOD AND THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS***

All of the work that has been presented so far, its theoretical basis and the ethical-political purposes from which they have derived, set out a scenario that is supported on heterogeneous conceptual references. Some of these issues have been referred to in an isolated way and this last section of the article will attempt to integrate them. Firstly, some of these postulates of the meta-theory adopted as a critical framework for the investigative work want to be pointed out.

Throughout the past 10 years, we have evidenced a considerable increase of interest in the socio-constructivist perspectives in Psychology, in general, and in the approaches that find topics and psychological problems specifically in the speech (Gergen, 1985, 1994; Harré and Gillet, 1994; Parker, 1988; Ibáñez, 2001; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Shotter, 1993, Wetherrell and Potter, 1992).

The previous assertion implies the establishment of distance in terms of “the mental paraphernalia in the head of each individual” (Parker, 1988: 1) and an approach to the conceptualization of what is psychological in terms of action and experience mediated historically and socially. Such turn, -that finds echoes and synergies in all of the contemporary social sciences (Wallerstein, 1996)- makes it possible the execution of critical-reflexive exercises that help to visualize the role and participation of Psychology in the reproduction of culture and in the regulation and control of the subjectivities using complex - professional and theoretical- mechanisms of power.

Latin America and Colombia are not the exception; the focuses mentioned above were the result of an interaction with points of view more local and articulated than the acute psycho-social problems of the region. These problems have demanded historically more practical and politically explicit postures, with grounds on the establishment of a necessary distinction between objectivity and impartiality (Martín-Baró, 1990; Montero, 1994). Consequently for research, the recognition is the base of the local nature of the culture and its role in the configuration of a group of local structural precedents, similarly to that of the action, interaction and subjetivization. The result is a model of analysis that is multi-level and interpretative in type.

From an ethical-political viewpoint, the investigation in Social Critical Psychology in Colombia is called to contribute in a determinative way to: cultural critic, construction of possible worlds, and the transformation of the practices in the social world – including new alternatives for subjetivization and self-narration as national citizens.

In that way -and taking into account the exacerbation which core is a modern self self-contained that is sending unmistakable signals of its potential of extinction (Gergen, 1992) - some of the challenges of Critical Psychology are linked to the critical deconstruction of the modern individual and the accompaniment of the production of new alternatives for the self-narration of the moral component. Critical Psychology has to face the historical challenge of participating in building scenarios of future for the care of life and the development of feasible societies.

Once the meta-theoretical components have been defined, a set of considerations are required from the context that make the development of critical psychology possible. In the first place, it is worth demanding from the theorists and researchers the construction of an informed opinion to deal with psychological problems. This process needs the articulation of scientific categories adequate enough for the comprehension of the contexts of poverty, violence, corruption and social fragmentation in Colombia and perhaps in Latin America.

As a consequence of what was stated before, Critical Psychology can develop technical processes of strategic articulation to influence in the social politics and the spaces of political negotiation, among others. Such incidence has to be materialized in the participation about the public politics, whichever the moment is, or their level of complexity. It means that Critical Psychology as a social and political participant is not exempted from responding to the relations of power and the citizen construction that it is able to promote; this notes that this participant is reflexive and conscious about the dynamic of its effects. Another example of the previous ideas, is the participation in the development of processes of prevention and attention to forms of people's affectation as an outcome of the political dynamic (of the inner armed conflict), as it could be identified in the works cited lines above.

In this context, Critical Psychology presents not only a theoretical and methodological option, but itself represents a way of resisting and changing the usual conditions of modern science, and more specifically of Psychology. Critical Psychology is a part of a conceptual field that adheres to resistance towards the established forms of applications and conceptualizations (Ibañez & Iñiguez, 1977). The assumptions that support this assertion are: the questioning to the notion of truth, the historicity of knowledge, the practical conditions it has, the social and symbolic construction of the reality, and the consideration of Science as a social practice and not as a superior expression of understanding.

Critical Psychology becomes, then, a theory of knowledge that is able to ask for the conventional basics which explain the appropriate way to have access to the truth. That is why it is important to recognize that from Critical Psychology a theory of knowledge arises (Bloor, 1988; Domènech, 1988; Domènech and Tirado, 1988; Latour, 1993), making its analysis a meta-theory referred to the conditions of production, transformation and naturalization of concepts. A Social Psychology of resistance can be framed in the perspective of the critical theory, or that one of the sociology of knowledge because it is constantly alert to the setting conditions that can reify knowledge against dialogue of knowledge and the recognition of the difference. Nowadays, it is impossible to understand any act of resistance from other perspectives different from the critical, as it is the only possible way to diminish the consequences of what is resisting. If things are not so, the result is the consolidation of constraining mechanisms of power that limit the spaces of freedom to which the resistance flows.

In few words, the disciplinary resistance, by means of Critical Psychology, is consolidated as a strategy of discussion of knowledge and its effects as well as of the professional practices of Psychology, based on an ethical dimension (Ibañez, 2001b; Molina, 2005). There is no other form of understanding knowledge but from ethics; this appears to be the turn between the modern and the post-modern conception of truth and therefore of science.

Finally, it is meant to point out some challenges that are set out for Critical Psychology in Colombia, this with the aim of keeping its development and foster its impact. However, it is crucial to maintain a reflexive vigilance to prevent the change of critical postulates into a new theoretical and methodological mainstream; this enhances the loss of any type of effective influence on the production of knowledge, the practices of investigation and the analysis of the ethical and political effects of knowledge. In consequence, it is proposed the privilege of an ethical criterion that guarantees the respect of the rights to the experiences in life and a echoing of the different voices that are present in the social dynamics treated before. To do that it is important to articulate three dimensions: investigative, ethical-political and formative.

At the theoretical level, it is proposed the strengthening of the hermeneutic power of the findings, tending to attain the challenge of contributing with pertinent knowledge to make the formulation of public politics stronger and consistent with and in the specific contexts. A way of reaching this goal is by developing strategies of appreciative conversation that can help recognize the other, that facilitate the re-signification of the self-narrations, the consideration of what the future will hold, as well as the quality of conversations that are picked for investigative purposes. A benefit that arises from the implementation of these strategies is to coordinate the process of analysis with a focus on gender that allows a refined and articulated comprehension from the differences, in relation with the micro-social dynamic that is studied (Estrada, 2001).

All of these theoretical and investigative processes can not be done apart from a cultural critic that considers the daily social practices, the prevalent psycho-social models and, of course, the knowledge legitimized in the local culture. This critic must facilitate the opening of alternatives for their transformation in the framework of the reflexive poly-vocality. All in all, the investigation, the intervention and the conceptual production of Critical Psychology must generate conditions in which the necessities and experiences of the social plaintiffs are represented, and in which the different voices –including those of the investigators- are articulated dialectically; it is about a way to guarantee the communitarian validation of the advanced interpretations.

“We are on the way but not walking,  
we have got on a vehicle on which we move non-stop,  
like a huge board  
or like those satellite cities that are said once to be.  
Nothing walks at the pace of men now.  
Which one of us walks slowly?  
This common destiny is the great opportunity,  
but who dares to jump outside?  
We don’t know how to pray either because we have lost silence same as scream.”  
Ernesto Sabato “The resistance.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Estamos en camino pero no caminando,  
estamos encima de un vehículo sobre el que nos movemos sin parar,  
como una gran planchada,  
o como esas ciudades satélites que dicen que habrá.  
Ya nada anda a paso de hombre,  
¿acaso quien de nosotros camina lentamente?  
Este común destino es la gran oportunidad,  
Pero ¿quién se atreve a saltar afuera?  
Tampoco sabemos ya rezar porque hemos perdido el silencio y también el grito.”

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