

# **Three critical approaches to psychology in Latin America - their rise and fall**

**Fernando Luis González Rey**  
*University of Brasília*

**Albertina Mitjans Martínez**  
*University of Brasília*

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses three important critical approaches whose innovative positions contributed to the development of new alternatives and ideas for psychology in Latin America different moment of its history in the XX century, when other positions were dominant: critical psychoanalytic approach in Argentina in the sixties and in the beginning of sixties; critical social psychology in the eighties and Cultural historical psychology in Cuba also in the eighties. What had happened that despite their importance those movements did not go forward? It would be analyzed some facts that in the author's opinion influenced on that stagnation. There are discussed social, political and theoretical phenomena involve in those movements as well as some challenges for Latin American psychology in the beginning of the XXI century.

*Keywords:* Critical Latin American social psychology, critical Argentinean psychoanalysis, cultural - historical approach, Latin American psychology, critique in psychology

## **Introduction**

Psychology has never had the relevance of other social sciences for social and political analysis, with respect to the more general theoretical, philosophical or epistemological questions concerning those sciences. Despite the impact of psychoanalysis in different social and cultural domains due, in my opinion, to the absence of theories able to fill the vacuum that has been the subjective side of social phenomena, psychology has maintained its distance until very recently when the interdisciplinary enterprise has gained ascendance in the social sciences. As result of this, psychoanalysis emerged as the universal reference point for theoretical excursions in the social science field.

Modern psychology to a great extent has been dedicated to the control, normalization and manipulation of human behavior in order to produce "well adapted and productive citizens." With such a goal, psychology became a tool of the dominant order. The focus on individual, inherent to psychoanalysis as well, ignored the social origins of the human psyche and overlooked its complex social genesis. Advances in the understanding of social systems as complex self-regulated symbolic networks within which different kind of social phenomena are interwoven in a continuous flux of consequences and collateral effects, which simultaneously affect persons and are affected by them, are relatively recent. Those advances in the representation of the social as a system within which all human phenomena are

interrelated were first explored within the tradition of Marxism. However, psychology in its instrumental and naive empirical orientation was for a long time excluded itself from philosophy and from the rest of the social sciences.

The dominant positivist framework prevailing in social sciences is oriented toward an objective representation of knowledge based on a linear and one-sided correspondence between knowledge and reality. Despite the fact that psychology shares this dominant comprehension of science as an empirical arena, those theories which did not follow this path, in particular those grounded on clinical work such as psychoanalysis, had in common their metaphysical use of theories, understanding them as sources of truth instead of representing them as historically situated systems of knowledge. One main example is Marxism, which in its aim to discover the laws of history came to a metaphysical and teleological representation of history, which was viewed as being governed by impersonal laws. That representation was to a great extent responsible for ignoring the role of human subjectivity in historical and social processes, within which individuals appear as mere epiphenomena.

The question of whether a theory deserves to be considered as critical is an important point to be discussed, since 'critical' is not a categorization provided once and forever, since critical theorization is associated with context and history. A theory exerts a critical function when facing certain dominant conditions in a given historical moment. Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, should be considered as critical in relation to those theories centered on an empirical, phenomenal and methodological ascetic approach, which were dominant in academic circles in that time. It was also critical concerning the comprehension of the individual as a rational creature. However, Freudian psychoanalysis could be considered conservative in its attempt to become an expert system with privileged access to the person's inner world and its laws, in which psychoanalysis reproduced the same positivistic scheme as the orientation focused on 'knowing' the general laws of the subject.

Theories can be considered as critical when they are able to define new theoretical and practical alternatives to dominant representations and actions. While being critical in some respects, theories may be conservative in others, or become the foreground for the emergence of conservative positions. Historically, theoretical dogmas have emerged as the result of the institutionalization of theories.

There are many persons, groups and institutions, which, in attempting to define themselves as critics, become mere echoes of traditional established positions, placing themselves far from an authentic critical action. The attempt to always be a critic may lead to the trap of being involved in whatever critical positions are in fashion, which can be very dangerous since critique is always a mediated result of our own thinking in process. Dogma is characterized by freezing certain "truths" as real and unquestionable. Once a given position turns into dogma, it loses its critical capacity, regardless of its ideological color.

In psychology, a misunderstanding with regards to theory's functions is all too common. Theory has frequently appeared as split in two main assertions, either a simply conceptual label for empirical data, or as a metaphysical system within which is possible to find the origins of every phenomena. The hegemonic empirical comprehension of science has led to underestimate how much the researcher's ideas and imagination as inseparable from any theoretical account. On the other hand, theories have been frequently used as a "package of truth" ready to be applied, instead of considering them as an imaginary corpus of ideas grouped into a dynamic theoretical model able to generate intelligibility in relation to certain

questions. Problems, as they appear to science, are never exhausted by the different possible theoretical frameworks applied to their study.

In Latin American countries, as in any other peripheral countries, the production of theories is generally attributed to dominant centers, what can be considered as a remnant of a colonized mind. In many Latin American universities it is still a prevailing practice to teach psychology on the basis of the traditional theories from the beginning of the XX century, without any relation to the particular teacher's inquiries or theoretical positions. It is overwhelmingly a mimetic and reproductive relation to knowledge. As one of the pioneers of Peruvian psychology, R. Alarcon, stated:

Latin American psychology has certainly been a psychology founded on the merits of European and Anglo Saxon psychologies, as axis of cultural influence over us. This led to a typical ethnocentric psychology whose generalizations and principles are based on the reactions and behavior of persons who are different from us. In summary: doctrines, concepts, devices and techniques are imported from abroad. All this leads to the definition of our psychology as dependent. From this dependency we should obviously liberate ourselves. (1998, p. 56).

Historical studies of psychology in Latin America have mostly provided descriptive positions concerning data, relevant persons, and chronological sequences of events: this has been important since without history there is no identity, but we are in a moment where a more qualitative and critical evaluation of our history should be done. It is our proposal in this paper to bring into light three different critical and creative moments in Latin America psychology whose legacy has been overlooked: the social critical version of psychoanalysis developed by Pichon Riviere, Bleger and other relevant psychoanalysts in Argentina; the critical social psychology in its Latin American version in the beginning of the eighties (Martin Baro, M. Montero, B. Jiménez, T. Sloan, J.M. Salazar, P. Fernández Christlieb, J. Kovalskys, S. Lane, I. Dobles, González Rey, among others), and the cultural historical approach in Latin America, particularly in Cuba, also in the eighties. These approaches were mainly characterized by their theoretical, epistemological and practical contributions to psychology. They opened, in each case, new commitments of psychology to the concrete social reality of Latin-American countries, since on the basis of their contributions new problems and new practices began to be developed by many groups of Latin American psychologists.

### **A different approach to psychoanalysis in Argentina at the end of the fifties**

Instead of being subordinated to empirical American positivistic psychology, as in the rest of Latin American countries, Argentina was a differentiated core of psychoanalysis production in the middle of the fifties, a time in which the country lived through a period of strong cultural, political and economical development. As in any prosperous nation, Argentina experienced a growing critical intellectual movement in that time, which within social sciences was strongly influenced by Marxism, but also by Peronism. As result of this "cultural splendor" the level of publication in philosophy and social sciences was higher than in any other Latin American country. Under those conditions many relevant authors emerged, and outstanding among there were: Enrique Pichon Riviere and his disciple Jose Bleger. Both of them were very creative in their attempt to enrich psychoanalysis on the basis of Marxism and also in bringing the topic of human subjectivity to Marxism in an attempt to integrate psychoanalysis with social practice.

Pichon Riviere's proposal was the development of a social psychology based on a critical approach to the dominant version of Freudian psychoanalysis, whereas Bleger centered on more theoretical and epistemological questions in an attempt to bring psychoanalysis into the social sciences, as it is possible to observe today in important European authors such as Frosh, Baraiser, Parker, and Hollway. Bleger was more academic, leaving an important writing legacy, whereas Pichon was invested more in the development of a psychoanalytic account of social psychology, intensively working on new group techniques. However, both of them were especially sensitive to the creation of new social uses of psychoanalysis, calling for new alternatives of work able to involve institutions, groups and communities. P. Riviere stated:

The social psychology that we defend has its focus in the study of the dialectical relation between social organization and the subject's unconscious fantasy... in other words, the relation between the social structure and the configuration of the subject's internal world, relations that are studied through the concept of the personal link. The subject is not only a relational one, but a produced subject (1987, p. 107). (Our translation)

That emphasis on the dialectical relation between social organization and the subject's unconscious fantasy was a great step ahead in that time, when a more naturalistic and individualistic approach characterized psychoanalysis. In his representation of the social genesis of the subject's internal world, he emphasized societal organization, a topic that was completely overlooked by psychology by that time and even was absent in the genesis and development of the cultural-historical approach in the Soviet Union, where the dialectic was progressively engulfed by a dogmatic determinism from "external to internal" in which the internal was identified with external objects and actions.

Bleger shared with Pichon Riviere a sensitivity to the social organization of the unconscious and advanced further with a deep critical analysis of the metaphysical character of Freudian dynamic theory. On the basis of the concept of drama as it was discussed by Politzer (1955), Bleger made a distinction between the first and second moments of Freud's work, calling the attention to the first one, in which, according to him, Freud advanced an understanding of human behavior within the person's life, studying the genesis of person's behavior and symptoms within the complex network of human relations and contradictions. That moment was identified by Bleger as the Freudian dramatic moment. Bleger stated:

Freud, from the beginning, assumed a completely different position, as a result of which he studied the symptom in relation to the life of the sick person (this difference is in relation to the formal way used by psychology in the study of the psychological functions, separating them from the vital course of life). However, information coming only "from outside" about all the events of life can not give the meaning and the understanding of the symptom; this comprehension is only possible when the facts are put together as they were subjectively lived, felt by the sick person, which permits the explanation of the symptom in terms of its function and as part of human behavior. It is this way of defining human behavior that I call dramatic. It means, in the end, that the description, comprehension and explanation of behavior based on the patient's life, as a moment of the whole of all his/her behavior (1988, p. 90).

Bleger highlighted, through the idea of drama, a new representation of subjectivity which resulted from "human immersion" within social life. But while recognizing the social genesis

of subjectivity, he did not understand that social origin as a linear and one-sided social determination over subjectivity. The impact of social influences on human psyche was drawn by Bleger as “the way they were subjectively lived.” That complex understanding about the genesis of psyche is very similar to that outlined by Vygotsky through his definition of “*perezhivanie*.” That concept was an attempt to understand the social genesis of the human psyche as inseparable from the generative character of human psyche based on the child’s psychological structure at the moment of experiencing any social influence.

Behavior was understood by Bleger very differently from the way it was defined by behaviorists. He defined behavior as a system involving human actions and the different ways they are subjectively lived by the person. This original and creative definition integrated human actions, the contexts and the person’s subjective structure as a dynamic interweaving system, without mechanical reductions to one another in quite a dialectical definition. By recognizing the social genesis of psyche, the author preserved the relevance of psychological structure, not as determinant, but as an active part of that complex system in process within which either behaviors or symptoms are generated. An individual’s psychic structure represented the historical synthesis of how persons lived their social experiences at that moment of their lives: this historical synthesis is a subjective production in movement.

Bleger attributed special relevance to some of Freud’s first works in which Freud considered the person’s life as the main source for analysing the complex persons’ symbolical expressions referred to the unconscious world. Bleger quoted the next paragraph of *Gradiva* as an example of the Freud’s position in that time: “... every person who wants to make an interpretation on the dream of another person should focus on all the details of the living events experienced by the person, both in his/her internal life as in his/her social life” (1998, p. 90). This Freud’s statement was really promissory as an example of the path that psychoanalysis could be followed if later Freud could not make the option by his metaphysical turn. This analysis in relation to Freud was very innovative in that moment.

According to Bleger, Freud could not advance further in this conceptualization because of the metaphysical approach of his dynamic theory. On this question Bleger wrote:

The theory developed by Freud in his attempt to generalize and to abstract the facts of the dramatic, was the dynamic theory, in other words, the reduction of behavior to permanently interwoven vectors of force; but those vectors suffered in Freud’s hands the same metamorphoses they experienced in other scientific fields: from vectors that descriptively replaced facts in a synthetic way, representing a complex interaction between different facts, they turned those syntheses into causal factors as sufficient and final explanations of any human behavior... .. In doing so, a descriptive term used as a vector was assimilated to an ontological entity, to a true entelechy, as a result of which the dramatic is completely relegated in his study (1998, p. 91-92). (Our translation from Spanish).

Bleger advanced his strong critique of Freudian metaphysics throughout his work. In this critique he entered into profound contradiction with the psychoanalytic institutes that were transforming psychoanalysis into dogma. On the dogmatic character of Freudian theory, he writes:

The person and human facts are replaced by true mythical entities; the difference with the classic mythology is given by the fact that the latter posed gods in special confines



(Olympus, the sky, etc), meanwhile the mythology into which the dynamic turned itself placed the mythical entities within us. We appear as the incarnation of the entelechies as a result of which the word is viewed as the externalization of the movement of such entelechies (1998, pp. 92-93). (Our translation from Spanish)

Bleger's critique of psychoanalysis outlined a new representation of subjectivity grounded in culture and social life. Bleger, supported by his dialectical thinking and his sensitivity regarding the social basis of human psyche, went beyond Freud and Vygotsky, advancing towards a theory of subjectivity from a cultural social standpoint. On the other hand Vygotsky, despite creating the basis for a new approach to the topic of subjectivity, could not develop further his proposal. (González Rey 2007, 2008, 2009). However, Bleger's work as a whole, as a systemic approach remains poorly known even in Latin American countries up to now. The references to his works are partial and fragmented and his more important contributions have not found new developments in any Latin American country.

Bleger, once again in a similar way to Vygotsky, brought to light the relevance of fantasy for psychoanalysis, a topic which remained overlooked in psychology for a long time.

Another important fact in the history of psychoanalysis is the inclusion of the patient's fantasies: in doing this the psychical field was delimited, once instead of considering objectively the patient's life, from "outside", psychology turned to look at the events of life as the patient feel them. Psychology was delimited as the study of the subjective side of human experience (1998, p. 110-111).

The human psyche as subjective phenomenon does not represent a copy of reality as was postulated by the concept of reflection in Soviet psychology. Since he didn't suffer the same political pressures as Soviet psychologists, Bleger developed the concept of subjectivity as a consequence of a dialectical approach in the understanding of the relationship between the social and the individual; he overcame that dichotomy recognizing in subjectivity a new qualitative phenomenon that emerges as the result of that relationship. The recognition of the generative character of subjectivity (González Rey, 2002, 2008, 2009) is fundamental for a non mechanical understanding of the social character of the human psyche; subjective processes can never be explained merely from social influences, since any production should be analyzed as result of the self organization of the system within which that production takes place. The system as Bleger understood it, immersed in the drama of life, was not an entity, but a living system that permanently reorganized itself on the ongoing subject's action. Bleger was not able to continue to develop the theoretical apparatus that he had developed significantly through that complex path, leaving this theoretical challenge to the future.

Besides his original theoretical work, Bleger also attended to the epistemological requirements involved in the study of subjectivity despite the silence of psychology on this matter. That silence conspired against the development of new methodological paths able to answer the new questions posed by psychoanalysis. Based on his dialectical epistemological view Bleger criticized Freud's use of the concepts in the following terms:

What took place was that, when facing the absence of systematized dialectical thought, Freud, making an enormous effort, attempted to grasp the course of the dialectical flux of human life through the formalist mechanism. One consequence of that is the vicious

procedure oriented to “objectifying”, to “substantiating” the phenomenon: death and life turned into concrete entities themselves (1998, p. 62).

Freud treated the concepts as objective entities. The psychic realm is being located inside, resulting in the treatment of unconscious as a closed intrapsychic structure that determines behavior from inside. The dialectical interweave between social life and individual psychological organization is not possible with this mechanical assumption. The representation of objectivity founded on the concrete, on the comprehension of life phenomena as things interrelated to one another within a well-established game between predefined entities, can not function as the epistemological basis for the study of subjectivity within a dialectical account. The gap between theoretical and epistemological principles in Freudian psychoanalysis was responsible in a great extent for the underdeveloped methodological side of psychoanalysis. Hidden under the shell of clinical work, psychoanalysis, for a long time, avoided the review of its procedures within a methodological discussion, which only took place in recent years - Frosh (2007, 2008); Parker (2005).

Bleger’s relevant theoretical and epistemological contribution also had political implications since his emphasis on the social character of human psyche expressed his orientation to the topics of health and institutions emphasizing the relevance of communitarian and institutional practices and questions for a professional psychological work rather oriented to social than to individual clinical consultation, which was the only professional attention associated with psychoanalysis in those days in Argentina. The political commitment of his orientation to social context is clear in the following claim:

The function that should be fulfilled by mental health professionals, and for every person involved in the social sciences and in the sciences oriented to the study of human beings in general, should not be circumscribed to a strictly ‘scientificistic’ task. The chances of working in a political sense with the arms given by science could find an important avenue in the extension of the work of psychoanalysts and psychologists as assessors, not only in enterprises such as schools as it has been done for a long time, but also in political organizations and social movements (1973, p. 516).

Bleger’s ideas were taken up again in Argentina by the critical psychoanalytic movement *Plataforma* (1971) in which he was involved from the very beginning, writing the first chapter of the theoretical and political platform of that group published under the title *Cuestionamos* (1971). *Cuestionamos* involved many important Latin American psychoanalysts principally from Argentina, and it was headed by M.Langer. Summarizing the orientation of that movement, M.Langer, in her prologue to the book *Cuestionamos* stated: “In synthesis: psychoanalytic interpretation can complement our sociological and political understanding, but it would lose completely its meaning entirely if, instead, we assume it in an isolated way, integrating its practices and knowledge as part of the social structure that Marx made intelligible.” (1971, p. 20).

The contributions discussed above were an important step ahead for the development of a new approach to subjectivity with important consequences for research and the practice of psychology in our countries. However, several interrelated facts account for the lost influence of that critical movement in Argentina, among which were: The exile of most of the critical psychoanalysts who were involved in ‘Plataforma’ because of the increasing military repression exerted after the military coup in the sixties (1966); the Bleger’s premature death at the age of 49 in 1972, and the invasion of Lacan’s psychoanalysis in Argentina in the eighties.

But the question to be addressed here is: why has this important legacy not found space in Argentina as part of the social movement oriented to the recuperation of social memory, which extends itself to all the sectors of the society? In my opinion the dominant interests of the universities and the professional associations after those changes were also responsible for this movement's fall into oblivion.

It is amazing that until the present, the subjective side of social cataclysms such as fascism, Stalinism, the brutal bloodsheds taking place in Africa, among others, have been mainly unexplored by literature. It may be the avoidance of the subjective character of human existence, a consequence of the dominant rational representation of human being, society and its dominant institutions. With few exceptions during the Modern period, among which H.Arendt, Elias, Weber, Fanon and R.Luxemburg should be mentioned, among others, the subjective processes in social and political phenomena have been omitted, with human behavior appearing as a mere epiphenomenon of social events. The processes involved in how social life is part of human subjective production are still conceptualized by many important authors as forms of internalization, a concept that in one way or another always emphasizes the external facts as primary in relation to subjectivity, which, in fact, is as real as social facts are.

The silence in relation to that important psychoanalytic movement in Argentina in the eighties has not been an exception in the history of intellectual movement in Latin America; the absence of references of authors like J. Marti, Mariategui, E.M. Ostos, F. Ortiz and others relevant intellectuals from our countries in the Latin American social literature is also notorious. As J.Pérez has incisively noted:

... the philosophical trends coming from Europe or North America, whatever they were, Derridian deconstruction, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism or Postcolonialism, become temporal fashions, not because they have not a philosophical value in themselves, but because the immaturity of Latin American intellectuals, in particular the academics who transformed them into fashions, taking from them the more strident ideas, their vocabularies, of which they can make fast and temporary use, while they prepare for the next ideas which will replace these ones (1999, p. 203).

This attempt of many of our intellectuals to move into the "top of the wave" of world theoretical fashions without having own lines of thinking makes manifest their fear and insecurity when thinking for themselves. The theories, as Pérez notes, are taken in the form of their "more strident ideas and vocabularies", avoiding a real and critical interlocution with them. This is an impediment to the enrichment of our own theoretical positions and to progress in looking for new lines of research. From this theoretical snobbism nothing new can be produced. Those trends also have several social consequences, which conspire against Latin American development in this field, for example the false egalitarianism in our academic circles, the bureaucratic order which could not recognize scientific merits, the absence of serious academic evaluations of the scientific works, among other deviations. This trend has been in a great extent responsible for keeping ourselves in a dogmatic stance toward psychology. Theories are assimilated as dogmas, not as systems of intelligibility to be used as the basis for the development of new ideas and problems on which the original theories could also be questioned.

The configurations of all these facts mentioned above were based on the interruption of Pichon Riviere's and Bleger's legacy to psychology. The exile of most of those critical



psychoanalysts who came together under 'Plataforma' movement, among which were the candidates who followed that legacy, despite the tensions arisen between them and Bleger when they broke away from the Argentinean Psychoanalytic Association. Some of those psychoanalysts returned to Argentina some years or decades later but the institutional crisis in the Argentinean universities as result of the military regime and of the growing chaos in which the country is submersed nowadays were facts that made it very difficult to bring into the present and to continue that inconclusive legacy that could be defined as one of the more creative periods in Argentinean psychology.

### **The critical movement in Latin American social psychology in the eighties**

The critical Latin American approach to social psychology in the eighties found its epicenter around Central America and the Caribbean countries; however, psychologists from many different countries also participated in that movement there, among which I like to make a special mention of S. Lane from Brasil and T.Sloan from the United States.

Central America was a very explosive zone from a social and political point of view, expressing tension that to a great extent was inspired by Cuban Revolution and by the magic decade of the sixties, whose impact was relevant all over the world. Many guerrillas and revolutionary movements were established in that period, in particular in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. Besides this, in South America there also emerged strong urban guerrilla movements in Uruguay and Argentina, as well as different movements of resistance in Chile after the military coup that, headed by Pinochet, overthrew the government of Salvador Allende that had been democratically elected in free elections. All those processes were inseparable from the aggressive policies of the United States against Latin America, which had a clear expression in the proliferation of military dictatorships in many countries of the continent in that decade.

In the context of the above mentioned events, many critical voices against dominant individualistic psychology started to emerge within Latin American psychology. Those critical voices made contact to one another through various meetings and conferences held in the region. Because of the attraction exerted by the Cuban Revolution in those days, many of those critical psychologists were interested in the Cuban experience, which strongly influenced all events mentioned above which took place in that decade in our continent. This fact encouraged us to organize several regional meetings in Cuba in which definite contacts between psychologists from Cuba, Venezuela and Mexico were established. On the regional level, meetings took place between psychologists in Venezuela, México, Costa Rica and Cuba, for example the Cuba–Mexico Psychology Weeks and the Community Psychology Meeting organized in Cuba through the Ministry of Health, and the National group of Health Psychology headed at that time by García L.Averasturi. Despite different theoretical and methodological approaches due to our different backgrounds, we all had in common a critical approach regarding the gap between psychology and social realities in Latin America.

In those days a group of Cuban psychologists established contact with Jose Miguel Salazar, Maritza Montero, M.A.Banchs, J.M. Cadenas among other Venezuelan psychologists, as well as with many Mexican psychologists such as Bernardo Jiménez, Jorge Molina, Darvelio Castaño, German Gomez, Gilberto Limon, and others, who were critics in their different fields of work. From the Cuban side the psychologists more involved in those exchanges were Albertina Mitjans, Juan Guevara, Manuel Calviño, Carolina de la Torre, Mara Fuentes,

Mónica Sorin and myself, all from the School of Psychology of the University of Havana. In that time the openness of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Havana was relevant to Latin American psychology, which its staff achieved with the direction of A.Mitjáns. The leadership of Cuban psychology in those days was exerted by the School of Psychology of the University of Havana.

According to Lane (1981), in parallel to those meetings, courses and conferences held in Caracas, México and Havana, in the Interamerican Congress of Psychology that took place in Miami in 1976, the status of social psychology in Latin America was thoroughly discussed and strong criticism was addressed to the positivistic and aseptic social psychology that prevailed in the region. Also, according to her, this movement continued growing and strengthening in the Interamerican Congress held in Lima, in 1978. After this congress and inspired by the discussions that took place there, the Brazilian Association of Social Psychology was founded, headed by Silvia Lane, who hence, played then an important role in the development of a critical social psychology in our continent. Some years later, Lane would get involved in the above mentioned group of critical social psychologists.

In the beginning of the eighties, after the Interamerican Congress of Psychology held in Quito in 1983, the Interamerican Society of Psychology began to move its gravitational center from the United States to Latin America, in a process that was very relevant for the development of the social critical movement under analysis here. In the subsequent Congresses of Santo Domingo and Quito, in 1981 and 1983 respectively, the topic of social and health problems in our countries continued to be central within the agenda, from which resulted a general call for a new psychology able to answer to those questions. After the later congress of Quito in 1983, the conditions for a definitive turning point within the Interamerican Society of Psychology were ready, and this would come with the Caracas Congress, in 1985.

The Caracas Congress gathered those psychologists who took on the works that marked the origins of that critical social psychology (Martin Baró, J.M.Salazar, M.Montero, B.Jiménez, I.Dobles, S. Lane, E. Lira, J.Kovalsky and González Rey, among others)<sup>1</sup>. In that Congress Martin Baró's original ideas had a profound impact over the participants. Also, very relevant was the presence of Paulo Freire, around whose attendance various informal meetings by psychologists of the region were organized. Those changes were possible thanks to the efforts of the board of the Interamerican Society in those days, as well as to the relevant work done by the National Organizing Committee in Venezuela. On that board of the Interamerican Society were J.M.Salazar, G.Marin, M.Fishbein, G.Bernal, and A.I.Alvarez, whereas Maritza Montero lead the National Committee, in which E. Sanchez, E.Wiesenfeld, M. Orantes, and J.M.Cadenas participated, among others.

Another important step forward at the Caracas Congress was the decision to hold the XXI Interamerican Congress of Psychology in Havana in 1987. In this Congress, the active exchange among the informal groups of psychologists oriented to a critical social psychology continued, leading to new projects and proposals. The Congress in Havana also represented an important political moment for psychology in Latin America. One interesting experience that came to my mind from those days was the invitation made by the Brazilian social psychologist Aroldo Rodríguez, who was part of the mainstream of traditional social psychology in Brazil, to Martin Baró, J.M.Salazar, A. Blanco (Spain) and González Rey to a

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<sup>1</sup> In that Congress plans were made for the book *La Psicología Política en América Latina*, edited by Maritza Montero, which includes chapters by all the psychologists mentioned.

round table in the University of Gama Filho in Rio de Janeiro. That meeting took place immediately after the Interamerican Congress of Buenos Aires in 1989.

As well as for psychoanalytic critical movement emphasized above, it was relevant to this critical movement in social psychology to address theoretical and methodological problems of psychology as inseparable from its practical and political engagement. As M.Montero claimed in her introduction to the book she edited and organized, *Psicología Política Latinoamericana*:

Looking at this review and attempting to make a synthesis about its main points there are some elements that stand by themselves; first, the undeniable presence of two general lines which orient these inquiries and studies. One that refers to what may be called traditional topics of political psychology, and another oriented by an attempt to find an authentic Latinamerican approach in regards to political questions. ... In both trends one could find a need for theoretical frameworks, partially filled by contributions taken from well established North American and European scientific authorities, but there the need to produce new theoretical explanations for a particular reality was also expressed (1987, p. 45).

That need to produce new theoretical explanations for specific problems of our reality was central in the first moment of this critical movement. In my opinion this was the only way to keep it alive in the confrontation with the new trends that always emerge in social sciences and try to engulf other ones on the basis of their more progressive and advanced character, becoming fashions which difficult the productions of new theoretical approaches.

That theoretical concern was relevant to this group in that moment. Martin Baró was conducting a theoretical review of psychology as a system in order to create the basis for an authentic new definition of psychology, which he tried to specify in his *Psychology of Liberation*. With regard to this he said : “In the end, it is difficult for me to think of any psychological category that should not be rethought ” (1982, p.73). He was particularly sensitive to the need to rethink psychology and at the same time to open a fluid exchange with other social sciences. He sustains a fruitful dialog with sociology, especially with Parsons, Giddens and Mills, in his last book *Sistema, grupo y poder: psicología social desde Centroamérica*. Martin Baró highlighted the close relation between individual and society looking for a complex and broad definition of society which at that moment was not possible to find within social psychology. Discussing the important concept of action in the way it was defined by Parsons, Martin Baró made a step forward discussing the idea of the action as a configuration of values and norms. “... this man who is considered by Parsons as active and creative is not so obviously creative at the moment of his concrete action; because for Parsons, human acts are not guided by values and nor configured by norms” (1989,p.22).

In that definition of action Martin Baró questioned the overemphasis of action and practice without considering them as organized in terms of values and norms. There are no blind actions that lead to a social changes, but actions engaged in more complex subjective systems which embody values. The action is not only an immediate and practical tool; it is a complex subjective configuration which develops in ongoing practice (González Rey, 1999, 2002).

Making a summary of the positive points of this critical movement it is possible to highlight the following:

- The interest in approaching multiple concrete problems of our region by putting social psychology in contact with social reality. This important political commitment was made along with work aiming to develop new theoretical and epistemological frameworks to sustain the critical project on a new basis. Martin Baró, who called his position Psychology of Liberation, represented the leadership in that effort for creating which represented a different social psychology. Our meetings as a group, most of them informal ones in conjunction with regional scientific meetings and Congresses were characterized by their open character, involving honest critique from each other without the pernicious consequences that this practice has provoked, up to now, in our fragmented and narcissistic academy in Latin America.

- The development of a critical position in response to mainstream positions in psychology. The attention of the group involved many creative ideas that were not known in the psychological references of the time. Concept creation was a challenge taken on by the group. New ways of approaching traditional concepts were offered in different areas of interest, such as the revitalization of concepts that had been associated with individualistic psychology, like motivation and personality (Martin Baró, 1986), and new problems and definition also began to emerge. In general we all were very clear concerning the need to develop a new theoretical system in order to advance in our practical and social challenges.

- The productivity of the group in its short period of existence was also something that should be remarked on. It is impossible to advance in science without committing to one's own ideas. The group took a step forward in overcoming the cult of foreign literature that prevails in the teaching of psychology within Latin American universities. Nevertheless, the decline of the movement, in a process that resulted from different circumstances, meant that this serious effort failed in its attempts to develop a new theoretical system. Unfortunately, many demagogic and rhetorical efforts tried to use Psychology of Liberation as a way of gaining personal recognition have proliferated, employing it as part of an uncreative and mimetic declarative rhetoric.

- Finally, it is important to highlight that despite its Latin American inspiration, the movement kept a lively and creative discussion about theoretical and epistemological questions developed all around the world. The Frankfurt School, different Marxist interpretations, Fals Borda, Fanon, among other theoreticians who were quoted rarely in the psychology of that time were constant references in our discussions and in some of the published works of the group. We were open to the world in our attempt to theorize particular problems from the standpoints of our realities.

Despite the achievements mentioned above, there was a group of circumstances that in my opinion contributed to the discontinuation of that movement. First of all, the early death of Martin Baró.<sup>2</sup> Another fact was the increasing economic crisis which affected, among other countries, Venezuela, where M. Montero and J.M.Salazar gave important support to the activities of the group. Also relevant were the methodological eclecticism and the prevailing fragmentations of lines of work within the group, which in some momenta became isolated paths without points of encounter with other lines. Considering these circumstances, it is also necessary to mention another factor of theoretical character: the movement was engulfed by the “dominant fashion” of critical psychology at that time - social constructionism - an option that attracted a great amount of fascination in our continent in the eighties, reducing the richness and complexity of social realities to ‘discursive practices.’

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<sup>2</sup> Ignacio Martin Baro was killed in 1989 by the Salvadorean army together with the Rector of the University “Jose Simeón Cañas” and other members of the university staff while they were sleeping in their university residence.

After this pioneer movement, some attempts have been made to revitalize it in different ways. As example of these efforts it is possible to highlight the Critical Congresses of Community Psychology that periodically have been organized by J.M.Flores in México, as well as the Congress of the Psychology of Liberation, which struggles to continue to be a space of debate and reflection. It is also important to mention the site [www.liber-accion.org](http://www.liber-accion.org) organized by I.Dobles which stimulates interdisciplinary expression among authors who characterize themselves for as critical in different domains of social sciences.

Separate from the initial attempts to develop a new basis for a critical social psychology engaged with the social problems of our countries, the authors split into different concrete areas; community, environmental, social exclusion, political power, social identity and so on, which far from contributing to a new corpus for a critical social theory became different paths with their own proposals. The last relevant collective effort in order to discuss some cardinal questions of a new approach to a critical social psychology as a whole was the book *Construction and critique of social psychology* (1994), coordinated by Maritza Montero. It is still possible to find among Latin-American authors many original contributions, but they are done as individuals and not as part of a collective movement. As Burton & Kagan stated:

The annual conference attracts several hundred people, many of them local; the travel costs are prohibitive for most people...The quality of debate is high, although there is not a great deal of original new works being done (2004, p. 117).

The idea of these Congresses was to revive the foundational ideas of the critical movements of the eighties, however, instead of emerging from spontaneous interests and motivated by daily life challenges as that movement emerged, these Congresses could not avoid the distortions that govern contemporary scientific institutions and events: the quest for the diploma, the pursue of quantity and not quality in order to ensure career advancement, and the fashion of the congress.

Today it is possible to observe the name of Psychology of Liberation being used as a slogan for supporting the concrete political positions of groups and institutions inside our countries. The Psychology of Liberation as developed by Martin Baró, which configured itself as a Latin American critical social psychology as the result of the combination of different theoretical perspectives, should not be taken as political platform for political movements. A critical psychology should be critical towards every institution whatever the ideological label. As Martin Baró wrote: "...if there is something that is dangerous it is to try to cover 'superficiality' with political slogans or critical analysis with ideological dogmas" (1986, p.73). Since all the institutions that embody power have collateral effects and consequences against persons and the societies in which those movements rooted themselves, a concern of critical psychology should be exactly to identify and criticise these power linkages. Between critical theoretical movements and political powers there should not be complacency, such as that sustained between Stalin and many Western progressive intellectuals until the 1950s. There is hardly anything more conservative and damaging for alternative critical options of any field than that postulate according to which specific persons and principles acquire immaculate and untouchable character.

Critical psychology can not be understood as a frozen system of categories and principles. Analyzing Martin Baró's theoretical repertoire we observe concepts in movement, in a constant unfolding into new hypotheses able to open new alternatives for making intelligible



the studied subject. Theoretical constructions should be kept alive, taking into account the variable contexts of human practices. As I. Parker pointed out:

Critical psychology, which is already sensitive to the historical production of concepts and approaches in the discipline, must be alert to the ways in which ‘alternatives’ only operate as alternatives in certain contexts... With respect to specific ‘critical’ approaches we will find occasions when contenders turn out, in other contexts, to be complicit with the more conservative practice of the discipline.<sup>3</sup>

By definition, a critical position is always in movement, and is never given a priori. The institutionalization of any position in the name of justice, equality, Revolution for whatever great cause, always represents a position of power hidden under certain attractive ideological forms. Critical work regarding the consequences and indirect effects of every human system that are beyond the conscious perception of their protagonists should be the core of every critical psychology. It is for this reason that a critical psychology should be always in process and in confrontation with given realities, behind which groups exert power positions that defend their own interests, and often in a process of which they are not necessarily aware.

Today, unfortunately, the only remains of that critical movement of social psychologies is a mix of different lines of research and projects, each one embodying critical positions concerning concrete topics without interrelations among them. Part of the problem is that Martin Baró’s works have been compiled and published in new editions with limited distribution in a small Central American country. These books have not been deeply studied in a way that new alternatives for the continuation of his legacy could be developed.

### **The cultural – historical psychology in Latin America**

Cultural-historical psychology emerged in the Soviet Union after the October Revolution as an attempt to find a path for the development of a Marxist psychology. Usually, that project has been associated with Vygotsky’s work in the period between 1928 and 1931 but, in my opinion, “cultural–historical” is more a general rubric under which is possible to include diverse trends of Soviet psychology rather than one concrete theory (González Rey, 2008, 2009). Cultural–historical psychology represented an interesting alternative to traditional psychology for at least two reasons: the definition of culture and social processes as the ground on which the human psyche developed, and the weight given to action in understanding of consciousness. Both of these moved psychology beyond instrumental understandings of the psyche, and overcame essentialist approaches as well. However, as with every scientific movement, Soviet psychology was caught up in processes of institutionalization that were inseparable from the dominant social subjectivity of that epoch, characterized by passive subordination of individual to State bureaucratic order, a fact that has almost always been overlooked in the more extended versions of the Cultural historical approach all around the world.

Soviet psychology entered in Latin America countries through three main avenues; first, through Marxist circles that were close to the Communist Parties in the region, as was the case in Argentina, the first Latin American country to publish Soviet authors. Besides Argentina, some isolated Latin American students from different countries did their studies in Moscow via Communist parties. Second, after the Cuban Revolution, a group of Cuban

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<sup>3</sup> Citation taken from Parker.I: Critical psychology.: critical links. Academy for the study of the Psychoanalytic Arts ([www.academyanalyticarts.org](http://www.academyanalyticarts.org). pp. 3-4). This paper was originally published in the Annual Review of Critical Psychology (1999). Vol 1. pp. 3-18.

psychologists, including myself, did doctoral studies in Moscow. In contrast to what happened in other countries of Latin America, most of the persons from that pioneer group belonged to two institutions, the School of Psychology of the University of Havana, due in a great extent to the director of the School in that moment, M.E.Solé, and to the Ministry of Education, due to the importance given to that process in Cuba. It was also because the visible strong point of this approach in that time was precisely in this field. In Cuban universities, just as had happened in Russia in the beginning of the Soviet Union, most of the psychologists were honestly engaged in Cuba's Revolution, as result of which we attempted to find new paths for the development of psychology with new theoretical and philosophical frameworks.

The third avenue through which cultural historical psychology entered Latin American countries, which became the strongest one, was through American psychology, because of the more extensive work oriented to that theoretical approach in our countries.

For a variety of reasons, a view of Soviet psychology common to the three avenues mentioned above, was mainly focused on Vygotsky, Leontiev and Luria, who were presented as being part of the same theoretical framework, similarly as what was defined as CHAT (Cultural Historical Activity Theory) in Western countries. Only in Cuba, where there were psychologists who did their doctoral studies in several Soviet institutions, was it possible to find a slightly different understanding. (González Rey, 1983, 1985, 1995)

Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Luria were treated as being part of the same theoretical approach for the following reasons: the first was the dominant and official role played by A.N.Leontiev for more than two decades in Soviet psychology. That privileged position permitted him to present Activity theory as synonymous with Marxist psychology, recognizing Vygotsky's work as a first moment in a path that culminated with Activity theory. The recognition of Vygotsky by Leontiev was very utilitarian, since it took different expressions in different historical moments, according to Leontiev's interests. So, for example, Vygotsky was rarely cited in the last Leontiev book *Activity, Consciousness and Personality*. Since the few Soviet psychological journals and the psychologists who had the privilege to travel abroad, were part of that dominant circle, their view dominated the way Soviet psychology was perceived outside the Soviet Union. Secondly, ignorance of the Russian language made psychologists from all over the world depend on translations. Taking into account the few and badly organized translations of Russian psychologists, it is not surprising that the knowledge of that psychology among Latin American psychologists was so poor. Third, one must consider the fact that the complete publications of Vygotsky himself were brought to light, either in Russian or other languages, only very recently.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from the fact of the previously mentioned institutional and objective elements that influenced the dominant conceptualizations of Soviet psychology among us, there were also theoretical and methodological reasons that explain that representation. The more instrumental North American interpretation of Vygotsky's work focused on the comprehension of psychical functions as instruments of action in a very similar way to that of Dewey. From this point of view the analysis of psychological functions as such appeared as the cornerstone of the cultural historical approach. In his more instrumental moment Vygotsky was definitively closer to Dewey and Leontiev than in any other moments of his work, as it was clear in the following statement made by Jerome Bruner:

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<sup>4</sup> The collected works of L.S.Vygotsky appeared in the eighties in several tomes published by Plenum Press. New York and London

To begin with, I liked his instrumentalism. (He is referring to Vygotsky's work. My note, F.G.R) That is to say, I admired his way of interpreting thought and speech as instruments for the planning and carrying out of action...Or as he puts in an early essay, "Children solve practical tasks with the help of their speech, as well as with their eyes and hands. The unity of perception, speech and action, which ultimately produced internalization of the visual field, constitutes the central subject matter for any analysis of the origin of uniquely human forms of behavior" (1978, p. 26). Language is (in Vygotsky's sense as in Dewey) a way of sorting out one's thoughts about things (1985, p. 23).

Vygotsky, through the lenses of Activity Theory, was reduced to a neutral position centered on psychological instruments, whose sphere of influence was limited to the more immediate individual actions with objects, thus obscuring the social and political implications of the early and late Vygotsky works. The more subversive of Vygotsky's references to psychological subjective processes expressed in those works (Yarochevsky, 1993; Lektorsky, 1998; González Rey, 2000, 2008, 2009), were completely ignored. The colonized and domesticated version that represents the human psyche as reflection completely excluded the resistance of human subjectivity to the objective dominant social order through its generative character. Instead of reflection, subjectivity is a production grounded in social reality. In the dominant version of Vygotsky's work his concepts of sense and 'perezhivanie' were also ignored, concepts which he had understood as complete living units configured as cognitive-affective and personal-social cores (Yarochevsky, 1993; González Rey, 2008, 2009).

The implication of Vygotsky's work for the development of the topic of subjectivity was completely ignored by both Soviet and Western psychologies. (González Rey, 2009, 2010). Such a representation permits the reintroduction of the topic of subjectivity as an expression of individual and social resistance in relation to dominant "objectivities," as well as the study of the different subjective configurations that emerge as result of dominant "objectivities" in persons and societies, as I attempted to do by interweaving the concepts of individual and social subjectivities. The cultural historical approach paradoxically has been interpreted outside of institutional, cultural and political events within which its different theoretical frameworks developed in different historical moments. Whether in the Soviet Union or wherever else this approach emerged, its relevance for the analysis or critique of social realities had been engulfed by the mimetic way in which the foundational theories had been assumed. It was not accidental that clinical and social psychologies were the less developed fields in Soviet psychology. Social problems were completely off the agenda of psychological inquiries in the Soviet Union under the more instrumental cultural historical version connected to Activity theory.

Cuba was a good example of this attempt at applying this approach creatively towards new emerging problems in our society in the eighties and beginning of nineties. Much work was done from the end of the seventies to the beginning of the nineties oriented towards concrete new problems that emerged in Cuban society as result of contradictions generated after Revolution. Some of the more important inquiries developed in that time addressed the moral and political development in children and youth (González Rey, 1984, 1989), the study of the poor communities with social problems involving social actions (Sorin, Tovar, Fuentes Avila, Dominguez Garcia, 1990; Mitjans.A & Pineda.G, 1989), the study of psychological aspects of chronic illness in which many problems of Cuban society appeared through the patients studied (González Rey (1987), Roca Perara, (1990), youth's ideas about Cuban contradictions

(González Rey, 1993), the image of Cuban youth here of the United States (Mitjans.A, Calviño.M, de la Torre.C, 1990), and Cuban identity (de la Torre. C, 1990, 1997).<sup>5</sup>

Besides the works mentioned above, new theoretical and epistemological issues were discussed: (González Rey 1983, 1984, 1985,1995, 1997,1999; González Rey & Mitjans, 1989; Calviño, 1990; Cairo Valcarcel.E (1992) Calviño, de la Torre (1997), Febles Elejalde (1988), González Serra (1984), D'Angelo. O (1984), Fariñas (1999,2010), Lavarrere (1991), Roloff Gómez (1984). A concrete expression of the fresh path taken by the cultural historical approach in Cuba was the meetings between Marxist psychologists and psychoanalysts held in Havana between 1987 and 1996 every two years. Those meetings had no precedent in any socialist country at that time. The development of Cuban psychology in those days was closely interrelated with this critical movement in Latin American social critical psychology described above as well as with those psychoanalysts who were part of 'Plataforma' in Argentina. In those meetings of Marxist psychology and psychoanalysis, Martin Baró and M.Montero took part, as well as M.Langer, A.Bauleo. J.C.Volnovich among other Argentinean psychoanalysts who participated in 'Plataforma.' In the eighties, Cuban psychologists were among those intellectuals discussing the political and psychological consequences of socialism, such as Sorin (1990), González Rey (1990,1993,1998).

In Cuba, the School of Psychology of the University of Havana, unlike other areas of the social sciences was part of the Faculty of Sciences, permitting psychology to avoid the strict ideological vigilance and control addressed by the Communist Party to other social sciences. One evidence of that control was that sociology was officially replaced by Historical Materialism, considered by Communist Party as Marxist sociology (González Rey, 1995).

The School of Psychology of the University of Havana was, for several years, the leader in Cuban psychology, evidenced by several indicators: the number of publications by psychologists of this institution, as well as their impact on Cuban publications (Cairo Valcarcel, 1998, 2000).<sup>6</sup> Besides this, the participation of the Faculty of Psychology in different national programs of research was also high.

However, the strong development of psychology in the University of Havana, as well as the climate of openness within the University to Latin American countries, Canada and United States, suffered considerably as result of the imposition of a rector from outside the University in 1994, in an attempt to align University of Havana with the more orthodox line of the Cuban Party. That decision was not an isolated movement; it was part of an offensive against the more advanced sectors and institutions inside the country, which within the Communist Party and in the name of Revolution attempted new paths in different fields of the Cuban society. The University of Havana, as result of those changes, was lined up into the official more conservative position and this led to the decreasing its growing critical function inside Cuban society. In the particular case of psychology, for different reasons many professors left the Faculty at the end of the nineties.

Cultural historical psychology has taken part in the critical positions oriented towards the more traditional psychology in other Latin American countries, in particular in Argentina and

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<sup>5</sup> Many other interesting works about the Cuban reality were done in this era by Cuban researchers, particularly by sociologists but the author is limited by the sources available to him at this moment.

<sup>6</sup> These Cairo Valcarcel's papers are a serious contribution in relation to the impact of the authors from the Faculty of psychology of the Havana University on Cuban psychology on the basis of their publications, which indicate the high number of publications produced by Cuban psychologists in that period as well as the impact those publications have had in the Cuban literature in this area.

Brazil. However, innovation concerning theoretical and epistemological topics has been less relevant among Latin American psychologists. In order to achieve the full potential of this approach as an important device for social criticism, it is important to overcome the conservative limitations of the pioneers' works that founded this approach during Soviet times on the first place.

### Some final comments

In this paper an attempt was made to write or articulate a different kind of history concerning Latin American psychology. The intention of the paper was to make visible authors and trends whose potential for the development of psychology is far from being exhausted. The paper highlighted the importance of thinking about our roots and of overcoming the fragmentation that has become characteristic of university and institutional works within the field.

History is a way to construct and reconstruct memories without which our identity remains imprisoned within interpretations coming from outside. Given the absence of alternative versions of our common history, the conditions for submitting to whatever dominant contextual influences exist, are created. Poststructuralism, which has severely criticized the notion of identity, is based on European thinkers. European and Anglo Saxon identities have been so naturalized that they emerge as an identity in multiple ways, without the consciousness of those who bear those identities. Sometimes it seems that the critique of identity highlighted by some thinkers can be expressed in the following way: "identity disappeared, because our identity is a universal one."

One of the problems for any peripheral psychology<sup>7</sup> is its incapacity to create its own theoretical basis to support its own specific advances on empirical research programs. It is erroneous to pretend that globalization brings us all the possibility of equal conditions. It is for this reason that the production of theory can not be seen as an ethnocentric proposal, but as a condition for overcoming the colonized position that is dominant even in the circles which try to use psychology as a way of emancipation.

The same reasons that could be used to explain the discontinuity of those authors and approaches discussed here can also be used to explain why Latin American psychologists are unable to develop strong lines of research with mutual interconnections, advancing together under some common principles and postulates. It is very impressive to see how, within our universities, one colleague could deliberately ignore another and exclude him/her from the group. On this basis it is impossible to move forward in the development of a creative and critical science.

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<sup>7</sup> I am defining as peripheral that psychology which is not produced in the centers of powers from which emerge the dominant scientific interpretations. For example, despite its theoretical innovative character and strong history, actual Russian psychology is peripheral. These actual production and even some interpretations about its history followed the main constructions developed by Western psychology on this regard.



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**Contact details:**

**Fernando Luis González Rey**

University Center of Brasília - School of Education University of Brasília

SQS 407. Bloco R. Apto 206.

CEP- 70256-180. Brasília. Brazil D.F

E –mail: [gonzalez\\_rey49@hotmail.com](mailto:gonzalez_rey49@hotmail.com)

**Albertina Mitjans Martínez**

School of Education. University of Brasília

Personal address

SQS 407. BLoco R. Apto 206

CEP- 70256-180. Brasília. D.F

E-mail : [amitjans@terra.com.br](mailto:amitjans@terra.com.br)