

An Interview with Silvia Tatiana Maurer Lane (1933-2006): Pioneer of the Brazilian critical and community social psychology

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Abstract

The process of development of community social psychology is described. This process began with the critique of the medical model, as well as psychiatry and psychotherapy in the solution of psychological problems in the context of the critical restatement of the relevancy of social sciences in the explanation of Latin-American reality and the militant commitment with the solution of its problems. This coincides with the period of mainstream social psychology crisis. The response to such crisis is a critical psychology reinserted into the field of social sciences and the qualitative, critical and forgotten perspectives denied by mainstream psychology. From this developments relations with the international emergence of a critical social psychology are established and the community social psychology of Latin America is described as a contribution to such critical perspective.

Keywords: Community social psychology, Brazil, socio-historical psychology

Recorded in 2005 in Liberia, Costa Rica.

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The life

I met Silvia for the first time in 1985 in an unforgettable Interamerican Congress of Psychology organized by a great team coordinated by Maritza Montero, in which I also met Paulo Freire and Ignacio Martín-Baró. At that time I was planning a book on critical contributions to psychology in Latin America. I told her about it and she was interested, but due to the difficulties of communication by post at that time I didn't receive her contribution. Martín-Baró and Montero did. But later Silvia contributed to a book edited by Maritza Montero on community social psychology in the same series on social psychology I coordinated at the University of Guadalajara. In 2005 I met her for the last time in Costa Rica in a conference where she was an invited speaker. She was already very tired and ill to be present all the time at the conference and remained most of the time at the hotel seated at the entrance of her shared room resting, reading, smoking and drinking during those hot and wet days in Liberia. She accepted to meet with me and Tod Sloan to talk and that was the occasion for this interview.



Photo: B. Jiménez

Silvia Lane was born under the Getulio Vargas dictatorship in Sao Paulo (February 3, 1933) in a family of Swiss-German (father) and Slavic (mother) origin. Living with her father, a university professor, and her uncle, a specialist in philology, seems to have awakened a taste for intellectual work. Living with her mother, marked by the experience of a

Second World War in Lithuania, must have bequeathed to her daughter the horror of violence (Campos & Guedes, 2006). Silvia Lane's first position was as a technical secretary at the Mackenzie School. She was married in 1962 to Fred Lane, a friend from her childhood. She earned a degree in philosophy from the University of São Paulo (1956), a specialization in Psychology from Wellesley College (1955), a doctorate in psychology from the College of Letters and Science of Saint Benedict (1972) and post-doctorate at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (1984). She was a Founding Partner of the Brazilian Association of Social Psychology and researcher at the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), where she created the second program of graduate studies in psychology in Brazil. She had experience in psychology, with emphasis in Social Psychology, focusing on the following subjects: Language and Socio-Cultural Groups. Silvia Lane's struggle, throughout her life, and especially in the difficult early years of Social Psychology in Brazil, materialized in forces that were important in the following years in the development of Brazilian teams of social psychologists, from the so-called "School of social Psychology at PUC-SP." With these psychologists and researchers in the field of Social and Community Psychology and after graduating in Philosophy at the University of São Paulo in 1956, she began her career in research in social psychology. Silvia was a professor at the School of Psychology of the PUC-SP, where she was the first director of the program. She worked in PUC-SP for over 40 years and was very close to her students and she used to say that her work was collective and that the contributions of her students were present in every one of her productions. She described this interaction in one of her articles:

Various paths were taken to try to create a form of knowledge that would turn us from passive spectators into historical subjects. Living as a professional under those historical circumstances in those times forced me to revise, in a critical way, my practice as a professor and as a researcher in psychology and philosophy. It became clear that psychology was an ideological science. How could this be? There were experiments, variable controls, and "quasi" conclusions. It seemed to many as if psychological science dealt with empirical data, with was observable, and it merely registered the data in order to analyze them.

With my undergraduate and graduate students I engaged in a critical revision of key concepts in psychology, such as attitudes, social perception, motivation, small groups, socialization. At that time nothing escaped our criticism (Maurer Lane, 1999, p. 368).

Even in the hospital, in her last moments of life, being treated for cancer, she asked frequently about her mentees and their work. Silvia Lane taught in search of a critical and reflective education, trying to sensitize students to the importance of the linkage between research and the needs of the Brazilian reality. For her, science had no value unless it was directly related to reality, seeking solutions to social problems experienced by the majority of the people. She held various leadership positions in academic PUC-SP and was the first member of the Board of the Association of Teachers of PUC-APROPUC.

Silvia Lane's proposed approach to Social Psychology, called critical socio-historical psychology, is characterized by considering the socio-cultural dialectic as constitutive of the human being while at the same time emphasizing the transformative and creative power of consciousness. Marxist-inspired, and holding hands with the Liberation Psychology of Martin-Baró and Maritza Montero, this analytical perspective of psychosocial processes was based on the inseparability of theory, methodology and transformative practice.

For Silvia, all of psychology would be social, because the human being is built on social grounds, being the product and producer of history through the mastery of tools and language. Thus, the objects of study of social psychology should be language and the group

since it is from these two processes that human beings find their identity. The methodology used should be participatory and qualitative in order to know the people, their problems and emotions and empower them to look for their emancipation. This idea that knowledge necessarily leads to transformative action, to praxis, in search of a life more full and satisfactory in terms of ethics runs through the work of Silvia in the field of social psychology, and is the brand that sets it apart (Bock et al, 2007).

At the beginnings of the 1970s she started publications that became internationally recognized for an original proposal of an agenda for social psychology in Latin America and Brazil, while critical, theoretically well-founded and directed for transforming praxis. The first of these publications was the volume *What is Social Psychology* (Lane, 1981). This little work aroused such interest that soon after Sylvia organized, together with fellow students Wanderley Codo, the compilation *Social Psychology: Man in Motion* (Lane and Codo, 1984). In the Introduction, she criticized positivist psychology as a science that deals with the abstract individual, which only responds to environmental stimuli like a robot, and proposes to consider that the human being brings a dimension that cannot be ruled out, that is, the social and historical. This discourse points to criticism of the ideology of adaptation, which pervaded psychology produced in the harsh conditions of military dictatorship in Brazil, and also sensitivity to the search for the transformation of the precarious life of the popular classes in the country. Silvia's desire was to build a social psychology that focuses on finding solutions to social issues through the knowledge of the concrete conditions of life and psychosocial reality of the Brazilian population, especially the low income classes. Her proposal is based on a reading of the historical materialist dialectics of the concrete as a synthesis of multiple determinations, and the lessons of Jean Piaget and the Soviet sociohistorical psychology (especially Vygotsky and Leontiev). She insists on the need to broaden the range of vision of the psychologist, incorporating socio-anthropological knowledge, and methodology of action and participative research. Among these publications stand out *New Paths in Social Psychology*, organized with Sawaia Bader (Lane and Sawaia, 1995), *Archaeology of Emotions*, organized together with Yara Araujo (Araujo and Lane, 1999).

Silvia Lane recognized the influence of Alberto Merani and Paulo Freire in her critical development around the need for a qualitative methodology and participative research for going beyond the questioning of positivism and mainstream American social psychology so alien to her social reality. She began to take initiatives in her undergraduate courses under the subject of "free studies." It has been said that Silvia Lane's sociohistorical psychology has two aspects of great complexity in the human understanding, the relation objectivity/subjectivity and of values in professional training. The way she achieved this goal was through a simplicity of propositions grounded in rigorous research. Silvia Lane stands as one of the main contemporary contributors to a Latin American critical social psychology.

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The interview

BJ: One of the topics you have worked on is emotion, both at the level of research as well as social intervention. Could you tell us about that?

SL: My students and I have studied emotions and health, both physical and mental. These studies clearly showed that there is a very direct relationship not only between emotions and mental health, but also physical health. For example, there are cases of cancer that emerge after a long period of depression. We have also worked on hypertension among women who had showed symptoms of depression over many years due to family problems such as their husbands' alcoholism or family debts. A cardiologist confirmed that the same things happened with cardiology patients. So, we think it is very important for people to be aware of their emotions and of what happens when they get emotional, since they secrete substances that can harm them, and if they are not aware of this, they will not know what made them ill. It is important for people to wonder why they were upset in order to deal with their situation. Some people have been healed by taking this into account. I always take novels as an example. In novels, there are always sad moments and people cry. Why do they cry? The important thing is to be aware of our feelings and not just suppress them, to recognize their importance in everyday life and know why we feel what we do. Often we need to review old memories, if they can be retrieved. One of the consequences of this sort of depression is aggression. How can we explain it when a 14 or 15 year old carries a weapon, goes to school, and shoots his classmates? What happened to this youth? Could it be that he suffered a lot of emotional repression during his childhood?

On the basis of this, I wrote a book called *Archaeology of Emotions* (Ed. Voces, 1999) for a wider public, with the goal of bringing people to awareness of the topic of emotion and the ideological character of emotional repression. When we think of dictatorships, who are the people most repressed by the government? The artists, the actors, the singers, because they express everything with a lot of feeling. They disturb the prescribed order. So, people need to have a very clear sense of how their emotions work and of their meaning in everyday life.

BJ: Reflection on emotion in society leads beyond them to something more abstract that makes people feel and mobilizes feeling. How do you explain this in your work?

Yes, I believe that to be true. In my talk at this conference, I cited Fernando González Rey who talks about social subjectivity. In my case, I speak of institutional emotional codes. If we look carefully, we can see that all institutions have an affective code that is transmitted to us clearly. For example, political campaigns use symbols. In the campaign of Governor Maluf, they used a heart as a symbol, but no one had to talk about it because it transmitted a certain affectivity to whomever saw it. In another campaign, they used a four-leaf clover to symbolize good luck and this also was never mentioned but it was always present. And, if we consider rituals in churches, it is not the sermon that touches us, but rather the type of architecture, the music, things that make us feel something. I have asked my students: Who among you does not get emotional when a bride enters a church in her white dress with the music in the background? People who are not religious get emotional about this. Why? It has to do with the meaning of religion. Like religion, all legal institutions tell us what is good and bad, but what is good and bad is something that we *feel*. Emotions are constructed socially; emotions simply install themselves in the streets. Society constructs emotions in order to serve its own interests. Because of this, it is also important to see how the emotions that are taught in the family come from other social institutions. For example, why are men taught not

to cry? This teaching is so powerful that it represses children's emotions. So, in order to do this analysis one always has to do a previous analysis of the institutions and their affective codes that are transmitted not verbally but through a series of signs and symbols that are present, that trap us and have a lot of influence over us. There are cases like the Workers Party, a party on the Left in Brazil, which used the slogan "without fear of being happy". Do you see how much feeling there is in those few words? This captures people and they often have no sense of what is being done to them. In our book *Archaeology of Emotions*, there is a whole introduction on emotions and biology and on artistic creativity, which is also important. According to Vygotsky, the function of the emotions is that they help us with language learning and with making superior neurological connections like memory, imagination, and even creativity.

Another question we asked ourselves is, why is this creativity constructed in artists and not in the rest of the population? Why aren't we capable of creating something in our daily lives? Mostly because the imagination is effectively constrained by the mass media. My co-author mentions Barbie with all her accessories, which doesn't permit a child's imagination to develop because she already has everything and imagination is not needed to create stories since she already has her boyfriend, car, clothes, house, etc.

Another Brazilian author (Lobato) who is famous for telling children's stories has a story about a doll named Emilia that can talk and lets her imagination unfold in a game that attracts children. There is a difference between this and the commercial production of toys that are limiting the imaginative capacity of children. It happens in schools, too. I will never forget seeing a classroom in which there was a long sequence of Halloween images, all painted in the same way. Where is the children's imagination? They have to reproduce what they are supposed to and not what is which is an important part of creativity for us. In our research, we are also trying to show that schools are not fostering the development of creativity. Creativity has been restricted to the sphere of the plastic arts and to those special and different people who are considered artists. In reality, all of us can be artists, even when we are doing scientific research. If there are no feelings, there is no research. It can become a cold activity with no links to social reality. For research to have a transformative effect on society, it has to have feeling.

BJ: Going further back, what writings or authors have influenced you? So far you have mentioned studies related to Vygotsky's cultural-historical approach, and Freire's approach, which has its origin in phenomenology. In your development, which would you consider the key authors, and how have you merged them with the previous articles you wrote about participatory research?

SL: Yes, we also had a period that I would call a critical period, critically defining traditional theories, in which we clarified how these theories produced ideology. We talked then a lot about the theory of social groups. But, what is group dynamics? It is a theory for the good functioning of a group that is trying to be highly productive, on the basis of which people are told that they have been told that they already know how to work with groups. When this is applied to a larger context, drawing on studies of group dynamics, it is assumed that we have to have a leader, as we see in group training in the United States, and therefore a lot of importance is given to leadership in society and the community. When it is noted that there is always a leader in groups in the US, we can say that the leader is not a natural thing, but is culturally and ideologically instituted. An example is that of the bishop in Ecuador who was working with an indigenous group and told them: "You are all leaders because if there is only

one leader the police will beat him or repress him. So you all have to be leaders, because you have to share knowledge and the decisions that you are making.” For me, it is clear that the role of the leader is a role that is ideologically created and is necessary for certain cultures and societies. This is the idea I started to work with in a group process starting with the question, “How does a group develop over the course of its existence?” Relations turn into actions and we don’t find a single person who constitutes himself as a leader because of the need for someone to tell them what to do. From there, the theme of domination is very interesting. We found groups where there isn’t a relationship of submission/domination such as between prisoners, between blind people, or between elders. We found that after many years the group senses a need to redefine its identity. A comical experience was with the prison group where a social worker did theater as part of her work with the inmates. When she went to leave that job, one of the prisoners said that we should tell the governor and authorities to give her back her identity. Only after many other observations did we realize the importance of group identities – all groups have many realities. Community psychology is indispensable to the movement of consciousness. When people discover that their neighbor has the same problems, the same situations, and that these are not individual but shared, they are going to question, because we all live those situations, because there is an understanding of social-historical situations and what to do and say, which is the problematizing nucleus that mobilizes consciousness. In this way, groups saw themselves implicated and this resulted in progress. The critical review we did of traditional concepts in psychology, based on published research and data on topics like attitudes, social motivation, and social perception, led to results that were terrible, because we saw that they didn’t lead to conclusions and concrete definitions. The only exception was the concept of socialization, because in this case, there were allusions to how children are raised in a socio-historical context. Politzer has given us a lot in his concrete psychology. There was also a Venezuelan who worked on language, but I don’t remember his name. In Brazil, we had two important books by Vygotsky: “Language and Thought” and “The Social Formation of Mind.” The first one was rich because it opened the question of consciousness, and it ends saying that the word is the microcosm of consciousness. This touched us profoundly – the importance of the word. We spent several years working on Politzer’s perspective. There were others, the French critics helped us a lot with our critical review, got us going in their direction. They went beyond and created a methodology, working with computers, mass media, and art media. We believed that the average person that is talked about does not exist. There are extremes that appear as average. We need to know people in their concrete form. So we dwelled on the methodological question and saw participatory research as the possibility of historical accompaniment of a social group. We also did case studies and life narratives that gave us a starting point for an analysis. Analysis is essential for capturing the empirical carefully and in the historical moment in which the fact occurs, if we are going to have a more concrete knowledge of the fact. Here we returned to Marx’s concept of the commodity, and gave us a lot. When we think of a commodity it is only an object, but if we think of the history of the object, in its construction, the human labor that it contains, we have another concept of the object. Why don’t we do the same with human beings? I ask my students why it is that we can read the works of authors who have managed to situate themselves with respect to their own historical moment, how is it that we cannot explain and know the people who are close to us? We encounter here the methodological dilemma that if we go beyond description we are abandoning it, but we do not have to completely abandon the descriptive part of the research. In the case of our research with the women with hypertension, we had no idea of what we would find. What the students did was ask all these women about their life histories and about what could be causing their problem. We found very different causes among them. After that, we did in-depth interviews, and there we found very diverse processes like family problems,

religion (religious issues about sin), alcoholism . . . and from that, we listed some of the causes that they related to hypertension. This is why I say that descriptive research is important, but it needs to continue further to capture the process that led to the observed fact. It's because of this that we came to the social-historical approach of Vygotsky, for I believe that it is very important that he asserts that facts can affect us in different ways or different facts can affect us in the same way. We have to work with concrete persons and not with samples, looking for statistical generalizations through studies where the most important thing is validity. We need to do qualitative studies, and in these the principal problem is the question of analysis, understood as the ability to start from the empirical fact and follow it to the socio-historical level to demonstrate its concrete reality. These days we cannot interpret like the Freudians 50 years ago. We have to demonstrate almost mathematically that A, B, and C are interrelated in causing X, and I think there are very interesting works of this sort. For example, a study on social identity in which the author interviews a domestic worker who changed her identity in a very interesting way. He records the life history looking at the contradictions that she lives and the qualitative leaps she makes, for example, from being a Japanese Buddhist to being a northeastern Brazilian. It is a giant transformation, a metamorphosis of identity. It is a case that presents very clearly the data that reveal the woman over the course of the transformation of her identity. There are other studies of this sort, but what I want to emphasize is that it is always important to respect the individual. I believe this should be the best approach for psychology. It is not a matter of going to sociology, but to understand the social context in which one lives. Thus the social sciences are sciences that help us to know the individual better.

BJ: You have advanced the argument that there is no concept of the unconscious among indigenous peoples. How is that?

SL: In the absence of emotional repression, indigenous people channel their emotions very well through rituals and myths. The emotions are always present, so the Freudian concept of the unconscious as emotional repression does not apply. There is no repressed dream. Dreams are from the ancients who are capable of those dreams. It is something that is very notable. There is another dimension of social transgression, and one of the characteristics of their children is the expression of happiness – their expressiveness is extraordinary. It is something that is not seen in children in the city. The children are not repressed or punished, but rather oriented or warned. Children are present throughout the tribe and all are responsible for educating them, not only the mother and father. I have never seen such happy children. Emotions are not repressed, but instead well channeled. An impressive fact is their direct connection with animals and nature. When they have to go out and hunt in order to eat, they do a ritual so it is clear that they are hunting for food and not for enjoyment.

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