

Special Thematic Section on "Decolonizing Psychological Science"

Psychosocial Accompaniment

Mary Watkins*^a

[a] Community Psychology, Liberation Psychology, and Ecopsychology Specialization, Depth Psychology M.A./Ph.D. Program, Pacifica Graduate Institute, Carpinteria, CA, USA.

Abstract

This essay advocates for a paradigm shift in psychology toward the activity and ethics of accompaniment. Accompaniment requires a reorientation of the subjectivity, interpersonal practices, and critical understanding of the accompanier so that (s)he can stand alongside others who desire listening, witnessing, advocacy, space to develop critical inquiry and research, and joint imagination and action to address desired and needed changes. The idea of "accompaniment" emerged in liberation theology in Latin America, and migrated into liberatory forms of psychology as "psychosocial accompaniment." This essay explores accompaniment and its ethics from a phenomenological perspective, highlighting differences from mainstream stances in psychology. Attention is also given to the effects of accompaniment on the accompanier. Efforts to decolonize psychology require careful attention to the psychic decolonization of its practitioners and to the cultivation of decolonizing interpersonal practices that provide a relational and ethical foundation for joint research, restorative healing, and transformative action. Such practices endeavor through dialogue to build mutual respect and understanding, promote effective solidarity, and contribute to the empowerment of those marginalized. The decolonization of psychology should enable practitioners to be more effective in working for increased social, economic, and environmental justice; peace building and reconciliation; and local and global ecological sustainability.

Keywords: accompaniment, witnessing, psychic decolonization, conscientization, participatory action research, negative workers, Fanon, Martín-Baró

Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2015, Vol. 3(1), 324–341, doi:10.5964/jspp.v3i1.103

Received: 2013-01-07. Accepted: 2014-11-15. Published (VoR): 2015-08-21.

Handling Editors: Glenn Adams, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA; Ignacio Dobles Oropeza, University of Costa Rica, San Jose, Costa Rica

*Corresponding author at: Community Psychology, Liberation Psychology, and Ecopsychology Specialization, Depth Psychology M.A./Ph.D. Program, Pacifica Graduate Institute, 249 Lambert Road, Carpinteria, California, 93109, USA. E-mail: watkinsmarym@gmail.com



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“To Walk in the Company” of Others

[W]hat we want is to walk in the company of man, every man, night and day, for all times.

Frantz Fanon, 2004, p. 238

On the eve of the Algerian Revolution, Caribbean-born and French-educated psychiatrist Franz Fanon became the medical chief of the French Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in Algeria. There he intimately encountered the colonial nature of psychiatry. Each day he struggled to treat both Algerian resisters of colonialism who suffered from the aftermath of torture at the hands of French forces and French military and police perpetrators of such torture. The psychiatry he was being asked to perform aimed to patch up psychic wounds incurred in struggles for resistance and domination, without clarifying and fighting against the system of violent oppression that was producing enormous emotional and social suffering in a subjugated and occupied population. His conscience demanded that he act to remove the cause of his patients' suffering: the violent colonial domination of the native Algerian population. To more directly “treat” these causes, he resigned his post at the hospital and turned his fuller attention to revolutionary action. In a searing letter of resignation he denounced the French colonial powers' “abortive attempt to decerebralize a people” (Fanon, 1967b, p. 53).

If psychiatry is the medical technique which sets out to enable people to relate to their environment, then I have to state that the Arabs, because they are permanently alienated in their own country, live in a state of total depersonalization. (1967b, p. 53).

Before his untimely death he wrote that “we need a model, schemas, and examples” different from the ones we have inherited from Europe and America, models that will allow us to join in “projects and collaboration with others on tasks that strengthen man's totality” (Fanon, 2004, p. 236). He urged us to “make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man” (p. 239). For Fanon, “what we want is to walk in the company of man, every man, night and day, for all times” (2004, p. 238); to claim the “open door” available in our consciousness so that the “possibility of love” can emerge (Fanon, 1967a, pp. 332, 42).

Liberation psychology offers us a language to describe the role that Fanon carved out for himself with respect to the Algerian people: “psychosocial accompaniment.” Psychosocial accompaniment counters the “cultural invasion” (Freire, 2000) of exporting diagnoses and treatment interventions that should not be universalized and imposed from positions of cultural supremacy (Nickerson, 2013). For both researchers and clinicians, moving toward accompaniment requires both psychic and social decolonization, a shedding of the professionalized role of expertism that is often oriented toward professional aggrandizement. This paper¹ is an effort to phenomenologically describe psychosocial accompaniment and to advocate for seeing it as a potential role for psychologically-minded people so that we can practice walking “in the company of others” (Fanon, 2004, p. 238). It responds to Fanon's call for “a model, schemas, and examples” in an effort to enrich our imagination about the kinds of decolonizing work that are needed (2004, p. 236).

Psychosocial Accompaniment

Accompaniment: to deviate from other pathways for a while (and then forever), to walk with those on the margins, to be with them, to let go. Accompaniment is an idea so radical and difficult for us to comprehend that its power and significance reveal themselves to our Western and Northern minds only slowly and with great difficulty.

Dennis and Moe-Lobeda (1993, p. 21)

“Accompaniment” is a term currently used in social medicine, peace activism, human rights, pastoral support, and social and liberation psychology. The concept is used when speaking of accompanying the ill who are also poor (Farmer, 2011), those caught in prison and detention systems (Lykes, Hershberg, & Brabeck, 2011; Ragbir, n.d., *New Sanctuary Coalition*), political dissidents (Romero, 2001), refugees (*Jesuit Refugee Service*), those suffering occupation (*Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine*), victims of torture and other forms of violence (Rodríguez & Guerra, 2011), those forcibly displaced (Sacipa, Vidales, Galindo, & Tovar, 2007), those suffering from human rights violations (Mahoney & Eguren, 1997), and those attempting to live peacefully in the face of paramilitary and military violence (such as the peace communities in Colombia, see *Fellowship for Reconciliation*, n.d.). In Latin America, “psychosocial accompaniment” has arisen as a role that is distinct from that of psychotherapist or psychological researcher, though it may include elements of each.

The root of *acompañamiento* is *compañero* or friend (Goizueta, 1995). It draws from the Latin *ad cum panis*, to break bread with one another. Dr. Paul Farmer (2011, 2013), founder of *Partners in Health* and an innovator of social medicine that creates systems of medical care for the poor that have been previously reserved only for the affluent, has placed accompaniment as the “cornerstone” of his practice.

To accompany someone is to go somewhere with him or her, to break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end. There's an element of mystery, of openness, of trust, in accompaniment. The companion, the accompagnateur, says: “I'll go with you and support you on your journey wherever it leads. I'll share your fate for a while—and by “a while,” I don't mean a little while. Accompaniment is about sticking with a task until it's deemed completed—not by the accompagnateur, but by the person being accompanied. (Farmer, 2013, p. 234)

Accompaniment often, though not exclusively, occurs in communities that are struggling with various collective traumas, including poverty. Liberation theologian Roberto Goizueta (2009) describes how the accompanier needs to forego his usual safe enclosure apart from those in need: “To 'opt for the poor' is thus to place ourselves *there*, to accompany the poor person in his or her life, death, and struggle for survival” (p. 192).

As a society, we are happy to help and serve the poor, as long as we don't have to walk *with* them where they walk, that is, as long as we can minister to them from our safe enclosures. The poor can then remain passive objects of our actions, rather than friends, *compañeros* and *compañeras* with whom we interact. As long as we can be sure that we will not have to live with them, and thus have interpersonal relationships with them... we will try to help 'the poor'—but, again, only from a controllable, geographical distance. (p. 199)

Farmer and Goizueta underline that accompaniment requires time and commitment, as well as placing oneself alongside the accompanied.

While keeping company on the journey, the accompanier—depending on the needs and desires of those accompanied—may provide individual and community witness and support, solidarity in relevant social movements, assistance with networking with communities at a distance suffering similar conditions, research on needed dimensions, and participation in educating civil society about the difficulties suffered and the changes needed to relieve this suffering. Liberation psychologists [Edge, Kagan, and Stewart \(2003\)](#) draw from the human rights and development fields to characterize the process of accompaniment as involving an invited dialogical relationship that becomes close and continuous, involving listening, witnessing, and the offering of specific, flexible, and strategic support. They are clear that accompaniment demands our capacity and willingness to experience the pain and struggle of those we accompany, and that we need to refrain from strategizing on behalf of those accompanied, proposing solutions to their problems, instead of listening intently to *their* emergent strategies.

Psychosocial accompaniment involves prophetic imagination, what liberation pedagogist Paulo [Freire \(2000\)](#) called “annunciation.” Around the particular issue or situation where one is accompanying there is a vision—latent or manifest—of how the situation could be “otherwise.” This vision can guide and inspire, serving to widen circles of solidarity, and to discern “right” action. Gutiérrez clarifies that the “poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order” ([Gutiérrez, 1983](#), p. 45). It is a demand not for development, but for liberation (1983, p. 44). The practice of psychosocial accompaniment should be inexorably linked to these demands.

For this reason, the lifestyle of the psychologist must also be susceptible to critique in terms of seeing clearly how it contributes to inequities and injustices. While as professional psychologists or human services providers we are used to thematizing the effects of our professional actions on others, the horizontality of accompaniment requires that we bring into sharper focus the effects of being alongside on each partner, the accompanied and the accompanier, including insights into the seeds and invasive weeds of coloniality in one’s thinking and behaving.

Psychosocial accompaniment often involves research and other conscientizing efforts with others to construct “liberating knowledge” ([Sacipa-Rodríguez, Tovar-Guerra, Galindo-Villareal, & Vidales-Bohórquez, 2009](#), p. 222), knowledge that will assist in transforming status quo arrangements that undermine the integrity of body and mind, relations between self and other, and between one community and another. Paul [Farmer \(2011\)](#) uses the word accompaniment to describe *Partners in Health’s* approach to the intersection of global poverty with disease. He stresses that real service to the poor must involve *both* listening to the poor *and* developing an understanding of global poverty; i.e., not only a structural analysis but an analysis that is linked with the affective significance of actual experiences of living poverty. The understanding that comes from these relational efforts is needed to power and steer efforts to end poverty. For Farmer, research divorced from relationships of accompaniment will fall short of the understandings needed for increased health equity.

Psychosocial accompaniment as a practice is rooted in an interdependent understanding of psychological and community well-being, not in an individualistic paradigm of psychological suffering. The one who accompanies holds the individual’s suffering and well-being in the light of the sociocultural and historical context, making conscientization (critical consciousness; [Freire, 2000](#)) the cornerstone of the practice. Insofar as psychological and community symptoms memorialize violations that have occurred, the one who accompanies is also a witness. This witnessing is a particularly crucial antidote when the events or conditions suffered have been repressed or denied by the wider culture. The creation of opportunities for testimony enables those who have suffered violence and social exclusion to exercise their agency and to bring their experience into the public arena to be acknowledged

and witnessed. Opportunities for testimony may help to restore or strengthen self-respect and a sense of oneself as an agent (Oliver, 2001), in addition to educating a wider public about needed changes.

When the one who accompanies is not from the group being accompanied, he or she often enjoys privileges and freedoms those accompanied do not have access. In particular, the one who accompanies who is from elsewhere or from a more privileged group (i.e., in terms of ethnicity, race, or class) usually has the freedom to come and go, and the freedom to choose to share the situation and to what degree.

The accompanier may also be a member of the community where the accompaniment occurs. Such an accompanier may share fully in the issues that are being addressed in the accompaniment, and not be divided by class, racial, or ethnic divides. Psychologists Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) chronicle the work of African American women in the U.S. Deep South to accompany members of their own communities, creating cultural centers that promoted intergenerational exchange, supported the fulfilling of community dreams, and promoted the arts and leadership traditions of the African diaspora to foster wider participation and inclusion. For cultural groups that are not as badly marred by individualism as many white Euro-American groups, practices of accompaniment are often deep cultural resources that reflect the lived values of interdependence and collective critical awareness.

Due to my own social location as a white American of European ancestry, I did not learn psychosocial accompaniment from my family and community of origin, or from my many years of psychology graduate education, but primarily through my relationships and work with Quakers. Through their tradition of “workcamps,” Quakers have partnered with communities to work together in a horizontal manner to help fulfill the needs of the community with an emphasis on justice being necessary for peace. While my earlier practice of psychotherapy certainly contained elements of accompaniment, the paradigm of individualism that undergirded it limited both the degree of psychosocial insight I successfully employed and the boldness of my moving beyond the therapeutic container to the societal roots of the psychological distress I witnessed. When I did succeed in doing the latter, I found myself more deeply involved in community work and participatory research where I learned to widen the arc of accompaniment that I had learned through the practice of psychotherapy. This work has involved more sustained attention to the social roots of suffering, and to those desiring accompaniment who find themselves outside of groups who more routinely find support and witness.

In social science research, researchers have primarily “studied down,” economically speaking, rather than “sidewise,” or “up” to the materially privileged. Many communities suffering from various forms of oppression and scarcity of resources have protested that, to the extent that their difficulties stem from those groups who are relatively advantaged, they would appreciate research and work that focuses on those whose lifestyles are creating suffering for others. While liberation theology and psychology speak of a preferential option for the poor, learning from communities about the sources of their suffering can well return a more economically privileged scholar-activist accompanier back to his or her own community for the work of conscientization and transformation to more just modes of relations with others and the earth.

This was underscored for me in 2003 while I was on a human rights delegation to Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. Members of the *Oficina de Buen Gobierno*, a representative council that governs a region through shared governance, told U.S. visitors not to stay there “to help,” but to return to the United States to affect the policies creating suffering in the region: NAFTA, CAFTA, the war on drugs, the export of guns to Mexico, and the support of corrupt factions in the Mexican government that have treated the autonomous communities in violent and destructive ways (Watkins, 2012).

In Latin America the practice of accompaniment by mental health professionals has a rich history (Hollander, 1997). During the Dirty War some Argentinean psychoanalysts emerged from their analytic offices to accompany *Las Madres de los Desaparecidos*, the Mothers of the Disappeared, to bring awareness to the abduction and often killing of daughters and sons by the state. Viennese psychoanalyst Marie Langer (1991) went to Nicaragua (via Argentina and Mexico) to work with others to establish a community mental health system during the revolution. Spanish social psychologist and Jesuit Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994) accompanied Salvadorans by listening to and then documenting the human rights abuses and state sponsored violence aimed brutally against them. Lykes (2001) through PhotoVoice and other work in Guatemala accompanied Mayan women as they suffered the effects of genocide and worked to make the genocide known in the wider world. In Colombia, psychologists accompany families forcibly displaced by paramilitaries from the countryside to Bogotá—families who have often lost family members (Sacipa-Rodríguez et al., 2009, p. 222)—while others accompany those villagers who have declared their villages zones of peace in the ongoing violence (Fellowship for Reconciliation, n.d.).

In the United States there is also a history of psychosocial accompaniment, but it has rarely been named as such. When it has occurred, often it has been seen as outside the appropriate role for a clinician or a researcher. Indeed, at times, psychologists have been censored for their accompaniment and seen as having fallen outside the proscribed practices for the profession. Accompaniment is more common in community psychology, but even there it is rarely thematized as such. Its effects on the accompanier are barely mentioned.

Freire (2000) was careful to identify culturally invasive approaches from culturally synthetic ones. Those involved in psychosocial accompaniment are mindful of the power of each individual to construct meanings and to transform the world. Interventions are not to be proposed “from the outside,” but determined with participants, alongside, through dialogue and critical reflection. The accompanier needs to be a reliable presence, making consistent and respectful visits, or living alongside. Through their openness to dialogue, the needs of the individuals and of the community emerge and can be engaged together in a respectful and thoughtful manner. The resilience of those accompanied and their own cultural resources for understanding and healing need to be cherished and supported, not usurped.

A Phenomenology of Accompaniment

Since accompaniment often occurs in situations of difficulty and even danger—where most of those who can move do—those who are accompanied feel less abandoned and forgotten, and are often less likely to be attacked and abused than those left to fend for themselves without witnesses. They fear less that injustices that are meted out will go unrecorded, unacknowledged, and unpunished. Due to the presence of those who accompany them, there is a bridge to a larger world, even if they are unable to cross it in the present. In the press of daily struggles they feel as though someone has taken the time to listen to their stories, to share the pain and grief they may be feeling, and to lift off their shoulders some of the burdens of the situation. The solidarity of the accompanier with those accompanied helps to build hope that the adverse situation is capable of change in time. This fledgling hope may contribute to helping people gather to strategize about how to transform the situation under consideration. Being accompanied underlines the dignity of those accompanied. I have heard U.S. prisoners speak about what it means to them that volunteers enter the prison to be with them. In the context of an Alternatives to Violence workshop, one said,

At first, I could not believe that the facilitators took the effort to come to this hell hole, to spend time with me. I thought, if they believed in me enough to do this, it was time I began to believe in myself and start planning for the life I want to live upon release.

For the accompanier, accompaniment steers us toward a different kind of being-present from many therapeutic and research strategies. It moves away from forms of egoic rationality that support control, management, “fixing,” and “intervening.” To accompany requires a fundamental re-orientation of psychologists’ professional subjectivity such that we dis-identify with the vertical hierarchy of expertism that has been endemic to our education for professionalization, and instead practice horizontality, moving alongside of others. It entails engaging a process of psychic decolonization that enables us to step aside from modes of relationship that reinscribe colonial hierarchies of power and value. [Edge, Kagan, and Stewart \(2003\)](#) describe accompaniment as requiring

(...) time, commitment, and openness and willingness to learn, negotiation of and reflection on relationships as they change, independence from agency allegiances and responsibilities, patience, sense of humour, the ability to listen and hear in non-judgmental ways, a flexible approach to and understanding of more familiar interpersonal boundaries, including, amongst others, those of 'friend', 'helper', 'client', 'expert', 'facilitator', a continual reconsideration of ethical judgments. (p. 26)

Too often when individuals and communities experience extremely difficult situations, others turn away with a blind eye. The initial insult is redoubled by others’ absence, by their failures of acknowledgment, empathy, and compassion. Accompaniment can be a needed antidote to the injuries caused by others’ passive bystanding or active denial of the human suffering in their midst. While accompaniment cannot wipe away the pain born of traumatic injuries—individual or collective—it can begin to set into motion needed processes of psychic and social restoration. The one who accompanies turns toward rather than away from those suffering. The accompanier sees and acknowledges seeing what others turn away from. The accompanier brings his presence to what is difficult, allowing it to affect him, to matter to him, to alter his course.

Who is this one who accompanies? She understands that the violence—both direct and structural—and oppression that people are subjected to has torn the connective tissues that bind humans together. If she can only offer one thing, it is to treat each one with respect, reflecting back the preciousness and dignity of his or her life. At times, the accompanier is an intimate part of the community and its members who are accompanied. She turns her attention to the well-being of the members and the group. At other times, she is one who has left the place where she feels most comfortable, and has chosen to make herself vulnerable. She may be returning to a place she originally came from or is crossing over into a place she has never been before. Either way, this takes effort and intention. She is one who has shown up where others often fail to come, at times when showing up conveys support and solidarity. She does not disappear when staying is inconvenient and even dangerous. She is one who, once known, is invited in. She is trustworthy and reliable.

We can learn from the extensive experience of musicians who accompany singers, dancers, and other musicians. The musical accompanist must listen acutely to the unfolding song or melody or carefully watch the movements of the dancers. Usually the accompanist recedes from the limelight, taking a supportive role. He often plays in a lower pitch, and sometimes does not play in the final performance. He provides the background for more important parts, supplying harmony and rhythm to the melody. He is successful to the degree that he is in alignment with the unfolding music. One exception to this necessary subordination occurs in what is called dialogue accompaniment, where the accompanier engages in a call and response to the “lead,” being silent or providing rhythm as

the lead plays, and playing himself when the lead rests, but always playing in relationship to what has come before—not breaking free of the whole unfolding composition but working in concert with the featured musicians to articulate the evolving music.

The accompanier of others patiently awaits a clear invitation to be present, and removes himself if this is not forthcoming. This is non-negotiable. The “accompanier” must be transparent and honest as to the uses of her involvement, as to who it will profit and how. Those extending an invitation should be able to do so in the fullest knowledge possible of who it is who wants to come and what their motives are. The members of the community must be free to participate with the newcomer or not, and free to ask her to leave. When there is a conflict between the accomplishment of research goals and the well-being of the participants and the community, the latter must be unequivocally chosen. For the accompanier the accumulation of knowledge is not an end in itself. S/he is aware that knowledge is to be used and s/he must strive to be conscious about the uses to which it will be put.

The one who accompanies knows how to resist leading when it is important that others do so. She values being alongside of others, working together with them, enjoying the mutual empowerment and greater understanding that arises when all partners are involved in knowledge-making. She has practiced holding her plans and interpretations lightly, choosing instead to hear the desires and meanings of others.

While she offers her support, she is ready to find that *she* is the one who will feel gratitude. Often the one who accompanies finally joins into the situations she has been separated from by virtue of her own social location. In doing so, her own dissociation begins to heal—her dissociation from the wider community, from the implications of histories of oppression and violence, from her own psychic numbing against the feelings she carries in response to the knowings she silences. She is able to emerge from the dissociation of bystanding violence—direct and indirect—to being an engaged witness who participates with others to create conditions for peace built on justice. In doing so, feelings of alienation and loneliness, born of individualistic modes of thinking and relating, begin to lose their grip.

The accompanier realizes that she is not the only one doing the looking, the observing. She wonders how she is seen, and is willing to discover things about herself she never imagined, or only feared. What privilege she enjoys is not invisible, far from it. By leaving her comfort zone, she may find that what she has taken for granted about herself and her life are thrown into question. She may feel shame, guilt, and embarrassment. She risks a rupture of her own certainties.

When we accompany someone who is not from our own community we are not on our own ground. We join them on theirs—even if this is a temporary place such as a refugee camp. The command we wordlessly exercise in our own offices, labs, and classrooms evaporates. Any plan we hold—however gingerly—is subject to the critique of many voices, and displacement by other strategies conceived together or conceived by community members without us. The accompanier requires not only an invitation, but a practiced and certain humility.

The accompanier has questions, but he wonders what questions compel others' interest. He can write, and perhaps he can produce videos, but he wonders how others desire to make their experiences known, if indeed they do. He listens for the images and the storylines that reach through and beyond words. He searches for the roots of feelings and symptoms, desiring a more complete understanding of the causes of suffering. He makes a point not only to hear into the suffering being experienced, but to witness strengths, beauty, and resilience, and takes part in activities that feed the spirit. He notes the assets and creativity of others, as subtly as he senses their vul-

nerabilities and needs. He is humble because much is unknown, but he is bold for the same reason, wanting to better understand and to act with others as needed.

If he has the freedom to come and go, he may be helpful in creating alliances, to bring the public spotlight to what has been pushed aside and hidden and needs to be illuminated. He works across similar situations, building alliances so that those denied forms of dominant power can find solidarity and support in their shared experiences and through their intensified interconnections. His witness calls forth his advocacy, and whether or not he is schooled in lobbying and policy transformation, he may—with others—need to find his way in and through these worlds to honor what he has borne witness to.

He is one who bears the tales of others and turns to meet his own. He works at being a witness for what many would turn away from. He has found the spot where the difficulty of what is heard becomes bearable thanks to the intimacy bred from sharing it—a fortunate alchemy in a sad world. He has left the familiar to be of some help, and he finds that he has not only come to know others, but to come upon himself. Some of his hidden wounds are no longer obscured from himself. His own complicity with the status quo that harms others may be revealed, and when he acts to remediate this failure, his values are sharpened and his integrity deepened.

Mark Potter (2011) in “Solidarity as Spiritual Exercise: Accompanying Migrants at the US/Mexico Border” presents a “spiritual phenomenology” of solidarity that is particularly relevant to companions who enjoy wider societal privileges than those they accompany. He draws on the work of Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino. From his reading of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, Sobrino believes that a potential of solidarity is as a spiritual practice that can engender mutual transformation. Honoring and living into liberation theology’s preferential option for the poor, the practice of solidarity is not a selfless act for others characterized as poor. Rather, the spiritual poverty and indifferent remove of those who live on islands of affluence is challenged, leading to a potential for self-transformation from an isolated “I” to a self-in-relation-with-others.

Gustavo Gutiérrez (in Griffin & Block, 2013) clarifies that the preferential option for the poor is not to exclude the non-poor but to work toward a universality of love, reversing the usual starting point among the privileged that too often ends up excluding the least powerful. Potter (2011) outlines “five movements of the spiritual exercise of solidarity” that help to cultivate the humility and courage required for accompaniment (p. 835).

The first movement of solidarity as a spiritual exercise is for the non-poor to physically enter into a broken reality—the reality of suffering, the violence of poverty, the social context that is normative for the vast majority of people in our world (Potter, 2011, p. 835).

He quotes a Brazilian proverb, “the head thinks from where the feet are planted.” Potter stresses the importance of moving one’s bodily presence so that one can come into contact with those who suffer in the very place they are living their lives.

The second movement is to respond to those who suffer with compassion and mercy. While the first two movements are outward, the third is inward. Potter, building on Jon Sobrino’s thought, stresses that through inward attention, the non-poor may experience a double humility that quickens appropriate feelings of shame. The first humility, Potter says, is one of association, where one’s proximity to people who live closer to death places one into more intimate relationship with one’s own vulnerability and insecurity. The “second humility,” he says, “is the realization that one has somehow been responsible for causing or exacerbating the suffering of others,” through action or inaction and inattentiveness.

In this sense, the scandal of the poverty and suffering of another—that which threatens their dignity and humanity—indicates a grave deficiency in my own human dignity that I have been complicit in the dehumanization of others. In other words, my encounter with the consequences of sin experienced by others makes me much more aware of my own sin (Potter, 2011, p. 836).

In the formation of relationships across the border between poor and non-poor, both parties confront the way in which oppression and domination cut across their experiences. “[T]he sin of one’s suffering is directly related to the sin of another’s active complicity or indifference” (p. 836). Potter describes how this can be a period of profound desolation for the non-poor, and they can be fearful of the wrath of the poor. Indeed, the poor may be angry and resentful regarding the condescension of the non-poor.

Potter argues that through a combination of the non-poor’s willingness to help shoulder the burdens of the poor, the poor’s generosity, and by means of grace (the fourth movement of the spiritual exercise of solidarity), a relationship can be born that bears forgiveness and acceptance.

[The non-poor] receive from the poor a new horizon in which to understand their responsibilities to participate in the transformation of the social reality that separates them, and a consciousness of why they so desperately need the humanizing influence of the poor to overcome their own sins. In short, they experience and learn the truth of the phrase, “We need each other,” and experience without fear or misunderstanding the truth of the claim that ‘apart from the poor there is no salvation’ (Potter, 2011, p. 836).

Potter describes the fifth movement as one where the poor and the non-poor live in the knowledge that their “salvation depends upon one another” (p. 836) and their transformation through relationship with one another.

Philosopher, theologian, and priest Ignacio Ellacuría, a Jesuit murdered alongside Ignacio Martín-Baró in El Salvador in 1989, rejected embracing “the accumulation of capital as the engine of history, and the possession-enjoyment of wealth as the principle of humanization” (quoted in Sobrino, 2014). He opposed a competitive and individualistic culture that has as its aim accumulation of capital—a culture marred by arrogance, greed, and a propensity to use violence to achieve and retain power—with cultures of solidarity where the meeting of everyone’s basic needs is a primary and foundational goal.

The relationships developed between the non-poor and the poor in a time of dizzying income divides are resistance to the centrifugal processes set into motion by transnational corporate globalization. To place oneself in proximity, alongside, those abandoned in “zones of sacrifice” (Hedges & Sacco, 2012) is to enter into conversation that rejects a vertical ordering of relationship, that seeks to metabolize the feelings of shame that arise through restorative action, and to re-orient one’s life to honor what one has come to understand. Such a model exposes how accompaniment serves the one who sets out to accompany, and by virtue of their encounters with others becomes clearer about how to seek greater integrity in their lives, so that the work they do and the manner in which they pursue it are more consonant with their deeper understandings of what is needed and important in the world that we share.

“Model, Schemas, Examples”

Fanon (2004) called for examples that would quicken our imagination of how we might join in “projects and collaboration with others on tasks that strengthen man’s totality” (p. 236). With this goal in mind, I want to share some examples of psychosocial accompaniment.

Psychosocial research can provide significant and needed accompaniment in the face of traumas inflicted on individuals and communities. Sacipa-Rodríguez et al. (2009) discuss “psychosocial accompaniment” in the context of working with Colombian families forcibly displaced from the countryside by violence. Their goals were

(...) to make a concerted effort to understand and serve the people in Bogotá who suffer from displacement; thus assuming the position of standing up for life, defending human dignity, and building peace and justice; as well as understanding the Colombian armed conflict in its ethic[al] and political character (Sacipa-Rodríguez et al., 2009, p. 221).

[It is] a process offering the displaced person a space to recognize their emotional experience along with the possibility to express their feelings afterward, reflecting on the facts implied by violent acts. We speak of psychosocial process that facilitates recuperation and repair of social and cultural damage. We believe that accompaniment should be directed toward the affirmation of displaced persons as subjects in their own stories and the reconstruction of the social fabric of the community (Sacipa-Rodríguez et al., 2009, p. 222).

They stress the importance of the principles of tolerance, mutual respect, and solidarity for building peace, and embrace UNESCO’s call for cultures of peace founded on “solidarity, active nonviolence, pluralism, and an active posture against exclusion and structural violence” (Sacipa-Rodríguez et al., 2009, p. 224). Following Martín-Baró, they see political violence as rupturing social relationships, and the healing of post-conflict situations as necessarily linked to the restoration of trust and relationship.

Their goal as social psychologists, they said, “was to connect not only with the displaced person’s logical mind, but also with their affection and spirituality. Informal everyday chats, actively listening, working and teaching were the vehicles allowing us to develop open relationships” (Sacipa-Rodríguez et al., 2009, p. 224). Through the collection of oral histories, the co-creation of support groups, the recognition and valuing of community resources that contribute to empowerment and resilience, the participants were able to create a community that gradually grew ties of trust. The authors emphasize, however, that a fuller recovery from suffering requires “peace and a dignified life,” the latter supported by meaningful work (Sacipa-Rodríguez et al., 2009, p. 233). For the psychosocial reconstruction of a community to be ultimately effective, it must be part of a total approach that includes changes in the social, economic, and political life of the country. The families wanted it to be clear in public records and memory that their loved ones were falsely assumed to be guerillas. They also wanted to know where their loved ones’ remains are so that proper burials could be conducted. Honoring these deep desires, the psychologists needed to become knowledgeable about and effective in interfacing with relevant judicial and public authorities.

In the face of violent repression of people and information in El Salvador in the 1980’s, Martín-Baró (1994) created a public opinion institute at his university. Through the analysis of anonymous surveys he was able to disseminate information about the political abuses and daily horror which citizens were experiencing and which it would have been too dangerous for any single individual to speak openly. Strategically deployed research can help to document

the situations people are struggling with, so that civil society can be better mobilized to intervene in the ongoing injustices and violence.

For instance, several U.S. psychologists involved in the treatment of refugees who had experienced torture in their countries of origin were alarmed when the existence and extent of torture at Abu' Ghraib prison in Iraq, in the black box detention centers set up in undisclosed locations for terrorism suspects, and at Guantanamo Bay became partially known. They gathered with other psychologists to form the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology, dedicated to removing psychologists from torture and abusive interrogation and instead employing psychologists in the promotion of social justice and human rights. They documented not only the changes in codes for prisoner treatment that formally permitted forms of treatment that were formerly deemed torture (and still are in most of the international community), but also changes that were created in the American Psychological Association's ethics code to allow psychologists to be involved in the deployment of torture without losing their license to practice psychology—a clear abrogation of earlier ethics standards. The psychologists exposing these abuses—including Coalition spokespeople Stephen Soldz, Steve Reisner, Jean Marie Arrigo, Brad Olson, Roy Eidelson, Trudy Bond, and Bryant Welch—left or supplemented their usual professional roles as psychotherapists to enter into years of research and efforts to educate civil society and members of their own professional societies, at personal risk and sacrifice.

Of all the forms of psychological research, participatory action research (PAR) is most resonant with the idea of accompaniment. In PAR, the psychologically trained researcher partners with a group or community to offer research support for the questions to which they seek answers. Instead of participants serving the research agenda of the psychologist, the psychologist serves the research needs of the community. The research is undertaken together to assist in the achievement of mutual goals. Community members gain the skills of formulating research questions, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and discerning effective ways of disseminating findings that assist in the achievement of shared goals.

In my estimation, no one exemplifies PAR as accompaniment more than M. Brinton Lykes. Over an eight-year process, Lykes collaborated with Ixil and Quiché Maya women to develop economic development projects, a bilingual educational program for children, and psychosocial creative workshops for women. Women with differing religious and political affiliations, widows of soldiers and guerrillas, and internationalists joined together through a PAR process “to create a photoessay that recounts the community's story of war and survival as well as current efforts to rethread social relations and rebuild institutions” (Lykes & Mersky, 2006).

More recently, through the Post-Deportation Human Rights Project, Lykes has been collaborating with human rights lawyers, immigrant community groups, deportees, and undocumented families to explore the effects of current U.S. detention and deportation policies on Salvadoran and Guatemalan families residing in the Northeast U.S. They are attempting to “reintroduce legal predictability, proportionality, compassion, and respect for family unity into the deportation laws in the U.S. through successfully defending individual deportees, thereby setting new precedents and creating a new area of legal representation” (p. 26). Lykes, Hershberg, and Brabeck (2011) describe the overall project:

The current interdisciplinary and participatory action research (PAR) project was designed to create collaborative spaces for bridging the growing chasms between citizens and non-citizens and for deepening a shared understanding of and response to injustices that immigrant families (many of which include U.S.-born citizen children) face. PAR is one of several critical approaches to research and seeks to develop

collaborative processes that prioritize the voices and actions of those marginalized from power and resources in educational, advocacy, and organizing activities that contribute to knowledge construction and material social change and/or transformation. Through iterative processes, co-researchers, including local community members, members of activist groups, and students and professors from universities or other institutions identify a problem focus, gather information, critically analyze root causes, and press towards redressing the injustice (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). To realize these aspirations, Fals Borda (2000) calls for the activist researcher to assume a moral and humanistic orientation that includes altruism and solidarity. Thus, he describes PAR as a “life project” (Fals Borda, 1985, 1998) which includes research and actions.

The interdisciplinary team seeks “to contextualize current risks to families within a socio-historical, sociopolitical and transnational framework” and “to collaboratively respond to current realities through community-based actions, policy development, advocacy and organizing” (Lykes, Hershberg, & Brabeck, 2011, p. 25). The activities of this ongoing research program are multiple: bimonthly support groups; leadership development workshops; periodic meetings to discuss objectives and the research process; community feedback and planning meetings; and a series of inter-organizational, community-led Know Your Rights (KYR) workshops which utilize drama and small group discussion. In community feedback sessions, “community members discuss preliminary findings from data analyses, offer alternative interpretations, and engage in debate about, for example, traditional and more contemporary family patterns that constrain or facilitate how undocumented parents face threats posed to their families” (p. 26).

Lykes, Hershberg, and Brabeck (2011) describe how they learned from the experiential knowledge of community members, enabling them to discuss the relevant issues with fellow citizens. This has also been my own experience in being part of a participatory oral history project in Santa Barbara conducted by the immigrant rights group, PUEBLO. Aware of the need to build bridges between the Latino immigrant and Anglo communities, I began to regularly attend the meetings, offering my help as requests arose. After more than a year, one of the members, Aidín Castillo, proposed an oral history project that would collect the *testimonios* of undocumented immigrants in Santa Barbara and then organize them into a book that could be used with various community and faith groups and as part of school curriculum (Immigration Rights Committee, PUEBLO, 2008). The goal was to help the wider community understand the experiences and challenges of neighbors in Santa Barbara without documents, particularly those from Mexico, our town’s largest immigrant source. Trained in participatory research and oral history methodologies, I offered to assist. My offer was accepted, and I was asked to help in various ways throughout the two year project: contributing to the education of the research volunteers, helping to host sessions that planned the project and crafted the interview questions, assisting in creating a strategy to analyze the interviews with regard to the key themes the group felt would be illuminating for readers, and contributing to efforts to disseminate the findings in a way that could stimulate community conversations, particularly between immigrants and citizens. At many points in such a process the psychologist must make sure that she is not usurping others’ roles in the research process so that it can be a mutually empowering experience, where the knowledge and gifts of each team member can contribute to a successful project. Lykes and Moane (2009) describe that such projects require “critical reflexivity and ‘just enough trust’ to facilitate engagement across differences, in ‘spaces’ of *choque*, dialogue and appreciation, wherein we craft solidarity, ‘lateral assists’ among *nos-otras*, and alliances for a renewed and transformed praxis” (p. 293).

The researcher living out a commitment to accompaniment now understands that his skills for inquiry can be shared with others so that they can inquire on their own behalf. He no longer conceives of his projects and questions by himself. He no longer takes his interviews back into his office, offering interpretations that go without others' interpretations, insight, and critique. He understands the wisdom of PAR and embraces a process of co-collaboration.

Apprenticeships in Accompaniment

Accompaniment can take place in many spheres of life and does not necessarily require professionalization. However, to take it seriously within psychology graduate training requires a re-imagining of curriculum and practicum. The spheres in which students are preparing to undertake accompaniment need to directly influence the curricular offerings.

For instance, those seeking to work with communities recovering from violence will need not only an understanding of individual and collective trauma and varied approaches to individual and community healing. They will need to understand the long history of the conflict in the particular region in which they are working and the present psychosocial needs of the community. In their "backpack" they will want to understand what contributes to cycles of violence, how communities have influenced these factors, and how to build dynamic and sustainable peace. Students will need to have experiences through community and ecopsychological fieldwork of joining into the work of a community, of learning to deeply listen, and to be nimble in being of assistance, often outside of the categories one has imagined for oneself. It will be helpful to understand how to undertake participatory research in case this is needed and how to evaluate the effectiveness of programs that may be instituted in concert with community members. A holistic understanding of how to move between interdependent levels of organization (place, individual, family, interpersonal, community, regional, national, global) is necessary to an understanding of accompaniment, as is a knowledgeable openness to addressing policy and legislation that may impact a given situation. In addition, they must undergo a continuing exploration of their own subjectivity for remnants of coloniality and examine the intersection of their and their ancestral families' history with historical and ongoing injustice and exploitation. Then they can approach the work of psychosocial accompaniment, knowing that their liberation is inextricably tied up with the liberation of others. As Australian aborigine elder and artist Lilla Watson cautions: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. If you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together" ([Indigenous Action, 2014](#)). In "Creating and Sharing Critical Community Psychology Curriculum for the 21st Century," Nuria Ciofalo and I have addressed these issues from our own experience crafting a masters and doctoral level program in critical community psychology, liberation psychology, indigenous psychologies, and ecopsychology ([Watkins & Ciofalo, 2011](#)).

Accompaniers as "Negative Workers"

Those who embrace the idea and practice of accompaniment should reflect on whether it places them in a group French sociologist René [Lorau \(1975\)](#) called "negative workers." Critical anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, borrowing on the radical Italian psychiatrist Franco Bascaglia, describes "negative workers" as professionals who give their allegiance not to bourgeois institutions but to those who most need and want their help ([Scheper-Hughes,](#)

1992, 1995). They are “a species of class traitor, usually a ‘technician of practical knowledge’ (doctor, teacher, lawyer, social worker, manager, or supervisor) who colludes with the powerless to identify their needs *against* the interests of the bourgeois institution” (p. 541). [Singer and Baer \(1995\)](#) describe negative workers as creating “openings’ in mainstream institutions that allow for critical” practice (p. 36).

If accompaniment is to be a role with integrity, it must not feed off those who suffer from the collective traumas of our time, but be genuinely committed to changing the conditions that sow the seeds of their difficulties, thus painstakingly undoing the need for their own role. Whatever psychological knowledge is useful should be democratized and made available to those who would express a need for it, instead of being hoarded to make one’s expertise more valuable.

It is probably not possible for a Western psychologist such as myself to actively imagine and enact psychological practices that do not carry traces of coloniality. This reality requires accompaniers to engage in and be open to a state of continuing self-critique. Perhaps accompaniment of the less privileged by the non-poor—while an important step—is a step on a longer path from the kinds of academic professionalization that have been common in Euro-American graduate programs to forms of walking in “the company” of one another, “night and day, for all times” ([Fanon, 2004](#), p. 239). Perhaps it is a necessary step in societies such as the U.S. that are so perniciously divided along class, racial, and ethnic lines. Will we one day be able to undo the professionalization of accompanying one another that professional psychology entails? Will the tragic divides of privilege and scarcity be so erased that we can show up alongside one another less in the form of one person with more privileges accompanying another with fewer, and more as fellow musicians creatively exploring and playing music with one another? For even in a more just world, each of us would continue to be subject to life struggles where being accompanied is welcomed, where the deep hospitality of one to another can help to lift the burdens that weigh down one’s spirit.

Sadly, all this seems a long way off. In the meantime, I here propose accompaniment as a humble yet potent antidote to forms of psychological professionalism that misread symptoms of distress ([Watkins & Shulman, 2008](#)), that fail to see deeply enough, that insulate against the acute and chronic sufferings around us, and that unwittingly participate in sustaining the disastrous divides from which we suffer.

Conclusion: “Accompanying or Not Accompanying”?

[Martín-Baró \(1994\)](#) concluded his last essay shortly before his assassination in 1989 with a challenge to psychologists to critically confront the social system their work is embedded within: “the most radical choice Central American psychologists face today concerns the disjunction between an accommodation to a social system that has benefitted us personally and a critical confrontation with that system” (p. 46). This observation, we have argued, is also true for U.S. psychologists as they witness the need for accompaniment in many spheres of life. The passage continues,

the choice is between accompanying or not accompanying the oppressed majorities.... This is not a question of whether to abandon psychology; it is a question of whether psychological knowledge will be placed in the service of constructing a society where the welfare of the few is not built on the wretchedness of the many, where the fulfillment of some does not require that others be deprived, where the interests of the minority do not demand the dehumanization of all. (p. 46).

If psychology is to emerge from its role in support of colonial discourses and practices, if it is to reject the pernicious aspects of neoliberal globalization so many and so much suffer from, then we must be honest about the genesis of the symptoms we are seeing. We must tolerate seeing the enormity of the challenges to human, community, animal and earth well-being. If we are to honor what we come to understand by listening closely to other human beings and the places they inhabit, then our professional practices must come to include accompaniment, and the advocacy, witness, solidarity, and critical understanding and action that flow from it. This is not a psychology that founds itself first on the positivistic and objectivistic pursuit of knowledge, but a psychology that bears and responds to the broken heart of our current world.

Notes

i) This article is based on a longer paper that I presented at the California Institute of Integral Studies on 10/ 29/13. In that paper, I extend consideration to the possibility of earth and trans-species accompaniment. Interested readers can find the longer paper online at <http://mary-watkins.net/?s=accompaniment>

Funding

The author has no funding to report.

Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgments

The author has no support to report.

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