

# LAY THEORIES OF LIBERATION

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Lay Theories of Liberation

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Lay theories of liberation are how people understand and what they associate with liberation in their own lives. This research explores this topic with interviews at two historical monuments, the George Bush Presidential Library and the Alamo. The goal of this study is to examine popular lay theories of liberation and freedom, and determine whether geographic location (the historical monument) plays a role in how those lay theories are formed. I will be conducting interviews at each location, transcribing the interviews, and examining each for common lay theories of liberation and differences between locations. I expect to find common themes throughout the interviews and see differences in content based on the geographic location and historical significance of the monument.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Lay theories are theories a person uses in their everyday life (Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001). These theories are also referred to as implicit, intuitive, and common sense theories and beliefs (Hong et al., 2001). Lay theories are useful to researchers, as they help to better understand how people interpret, identify, understand certain situations and actions (Hong et al., 2001), and therefore can better conduct research on these items (Sommers & Norton, 2006). It's not always clear how these theories are formed, but it's believed that a person's knowledge and experience play an important role (Hong et al., 2001). How an individual develops a lay theory on liberation will depend on their knowledge, experiences, and personal beliefs.

The benefits of using a lay theories approach with psychology are gaining a better understanding of behaviors and characteristics of groups, and being able to examine differences in attributions of such theories between different groups (e.g. 'White' and 'Non White'; Sommers & Norton, 2006). For example, when Sommers and Norton (2006) investigated lay theories of racism, they found that participants attribute modern racism with subtle and ambiguous thoughts, actions, and preferences compared to overt actions of old-fashioned racism (Sommers & Norton, 2006). A lay theories approach helped them illuminate behaviors and characteristics associated with modern definitions of racism that "lead to controversy and intergroup conflict in contemporary society" (Sommers & Norton, 2006, p. 118).

In the current research, I apply a lay theories approach to understandings of Liberation. In the United States, we have experienced liberation via war (e.g. Revolutionary war, Texas

Revolution), and liberation brought on by social movements that make it to our court system (e.g. Civil Rights Movement, Marriage Equality). A single person's view point on liberation is determined by their perspective, their own experience, and on how they've examined history to see how liberation has been seen in the past (Martin-Baro, 1994).

Martin-Baro (1994) discusses three tasks necessary to achieve liberation psychology in the Latin-American context: the recovery of historical memory, de-ideologizing everyday experience, and utilizing people's virtues. 'De-ideologizing everyday experiences' works to utilize recovered historical memory to make sense of one's circumstances (Tate, Rivera, Brown & Skaistis, 2013) and reveals how one incorporates duties and rights when developing a lay theory of liberation. A duty is described as "an action engaged in on the behalf of others", such as protests; Right is "something to be demanded by individuals who may have been wronged", such as the right to marriage for same sex couples (Grabe & Dutt, 2015). In these interviews, I'm able to pull these duties and rights through the historical people, places, and events participants describe when discussing liberation. Utilizing people's virtues occurs when working to improve an oppressed people's circumstances (Tate et al., 2013), and isn't explored in this project.

'The recovery of historical memory' involves recovering one's own identity and relying on a tradition and culture to rescue aspects of identity that serve for liberation (Martin-Baro, 1994). As such, historical monuments may be used as a natural primer to an individual's ideals on liberation and freedom. This suggests that perspectives can also be influenced by geographic location. This project looks at how various historical monuments can influence one's feelings on liberation and what examples from history they pull from to support their lay theory.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

The participants in this study were 9 adults at least 18 years of age (6 males, 3 females) chosen at random for interviews outside the George Bush Library in College Station, Texas and the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas. Participants were 78% White/Caucasian, 11% Black/African American, and 11% Hispanic/Latino; 33% of the participants have a lower-middle class socio-economic background, 56% have a middle class background, and 11% have an upper class background.

The study consisted of an interview survey administered outside either the George Bush Presidential Library Museum or the Alamo Mission and was recorded with consent on an iPhone. The interviews were then uploaded to a secure online storage program. Each subject was approached by me, the research assistant, asked to participate in an interview on “social representations of history and intergroup relations”, and taken through an oral consenting process. If they agreed to participate, the subject orally gave consent on the recording and the interview began. The dependent variables of the interview consisted of 11 open-ended questions (What comes to mind when you think of *liberation*?), followed by 7 open-ended demographic questions (What is your gender?) (See APPENDIX A). Interviews ended with another opportunity to share any other information, and the subjects were thanked for their time and participation.

Once all the interviews were collected, myself and other research assistants in the department of psychology at Texas A&M University then transcribed them. This was done by listening to the recording and typing in a specified format in Microsoft Word document. Once transcription of

the interviews was completed, I printed them and began analyzing the information. First, I wrote each question and response on a notecard, dividing the notecards up by question so that each response to a particular question was stacked together. I analyzed each question/response combination independent of the location of the interview. Next, each independent response was sorted by similarity to other responses to that question. This sorting was done by looking at similar word usage, or interpreted themes within the response. Finally, I attached the location to each response and analyzed the themes to determine if there were any differences between the George Bush Library and the Alamo.



## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

As detailed in the methods, participants from two research sites, the George Bush Library and Alamo Mission, answered eleven open-ended and seven demographic questions. To analyze the results, I examined the responses to each question separately, and then constructed the themes in relation to location.

#### **Why are you at the George Bush Library/Alamo today?**

Responses to this question were divided by location. The first location was “the George Bush Library” (N=5). Participants were at the memorial library for various reasons. Three were there as tourists that wanted to visit the library and learn more about President Bush. One was there with clients showing them around. Another was there to have pictures taken with her dog for a magazine. The second location was “the Alamo” (N=4). Three participants stated they were at the Alamo Mission to learn about the history, and one stated they were there touring the sites.

#### **What comes to mind when you think about “liberation”?**

I saw two different themes in response to this question. It seems that for most people, freedom comes to mind when they think about liberation (e.g., freedom in general and from the government; to gain freedom; N=8). The responses under this theme include the term ‘freedom’, the process of gaining freedom via struggles and fights, freedoms from the government, including discrimination, minorities, women, and overall equal rights. The second theme involves an unrealized goal or dream (e.g. liberation has not yet been achieved N=1), and the

participant does not believe that liberation and all that comes with it is something we have not accomplished yet.

**If you had to define ‘liberation’, what would be your definition?**

I saw two separate themes emerge from this question. First, many participants defined liberation as freedom (e.g. “being liberated/free; to do what you want”; N=7). Participants talked about the state of being free or liberated, and having the freedom to do as you choose. The second theme is individual autonomy (e.g., “to live your own life without negatively affecting another person’s right to live their life”; N=2). These responses focused on the idea of being free to live your life as you want, but with the condition that you are not taking away the right for another person to live their life.

**What antonym would you give for ‘liberation’?**

Participant responses fell under three themes. The first theme included physical restriction, such as prison or some other restriction of movement, and restrictions of certain freedoms as voting (N=5). Next, the term ‘oppression’ was expressed as the antonym to liberation (N=3). Lastly, an unrealized lack of freedom (e.g. lack of freedom due to certain responsibilities; N=1) came to mind as the opposite meaning of liberation. This participant spoke about the idea that people are tied to families and expectations, and do not have as much freedom as they believe.

**Do you think [*participant antonym*] has a good or bad connotation?**

After giving their antonyms to liberation, each participant was asked if they believe it had a good or bad connotation. Most participants expressed that their respective antonyms had a bad connotation (N=7). Others felt ambivalent about their antonyms (e.g., “Potentially good or bad connotation”; N=2). One participant stated that the prevention of free will “depends on when the

free will imposes on other people.” Another participant stated that being tied down to families and expectations generally does not have a good connotation.

### **What would you call someone that fights against ‘oppression’?**

Three themes emerged in participant responses. It seems that most people think of a liberator or freedom fighter as someone that fights against oppression (N=5). One participant explained that it depends on what/who the person is fighting to liberate (N=1), and gave the comparison between someone fighting to free people imprisoned by a dictator and someone fighting to free people imprisoned for doing bad or evil things. Lastly, there was a reverse score as participants gave a response opposite of what the question intended (N=3). These responses included ‘oppressor’, ‘a creep’, and ‘wrong’.

### **What comes to mind when you think about ‘resistance’?**

These responses fell under one of five themes. An active form of resisting (e.g. fighting, revolution, or going against something that is expected of you; N=4) came to mind for some participants. Other participants focused on the motivations behind a person resisting (e.g. why one might resist; N=2), and contains the example of the Founding Fathers resisting British occupation in America. This theme also represents the difference between someone resisting freedom to control others and someone resisting freedom to help others. Thirdly, I saw a differentiation between passive and aggressive resistance (N=1) where the participant explains the benefits of passive over aggressive resistance. The fourth theme touched on being physically restrained (e.g. being restrained by handcuffs or being tied to something; N=1). The final theme I saw referred to people in a society that do not want things to change (e.g. resistant to change; N=1), and the participant stated that if one person has rights then so should other people.

### **What comes to mind when you think about ‘rebellion’?**

Two themes emerged from participant responses. Most participants thought about actively fighting to change something in a good or bad way (e.g. rebelling against a system, society, norms, or government; N=7). The second theme showed an example of a rebellion (e.g. the Civil War; N=1) that the participant gave in response to the question.

### **What comes to mind when you think about ‘protest’?**

I found three different themes to this question. The first theme is an organized way toward change (e.g. paths of passively/peacefully working towards a change; N=4). Responses included that protests can involve a breakdown of communications, a non-violent passive resistance, and a peaceful protest. Secondly, some participants gave common examples of protests (N=2), which include gay rights, Feminism, and Occupy Wall Street. The last theme that emerged is unguided resistance (N=2), which implies that people do not really know what they are fighting for when they protest.

### **What comes to mind when you think about ‘riot’?**

Four Themes came out in these responses. The first theme focused on popular negative aspects of rioting (N=2), and describes riots as instigated, aggressive resistance that results in violence and destruction of property. Next the participant touched on the motivations behind rioting (e.g. why people riot; N=1). Some of these motivations include civil disobedience and a route to change something. Some participants associate rioting with fighting (N=2), and used the term ‘fighting’ in their response. The final theme is historical riots and common visualization of riots (e.g. examples of riots; popular characteristics of riots; N=3). These participants described historical riots such as the Los Angeles riots, Rodney King riots, and Pussy riot in Russia. One participant described the popular characteristic of police with shields and gas masks.

### **What are the most important people, places, and events in American history?**

When asked about important people, places, and events in American history, participant responses fell into four themes. The first theme contains important eras for American liberation (e.g. fighting for freedom from Great Britain and forward; N=5). This theme mentions the Founding Fathers and American Revolution, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, and World War 1 and World War 2. The second theme broadly referred to any instance in which the right for free choice (N=1) was important. This participant discussed that when people decided free choice was important was when things really changed in the world. Lastly, the importance of America's Indigenous people was introduced. (N=1). This participant stated that Indigenous movements, and the genocide within these movements, are very important to American history. They also state that Civil War and "old White men" are also important aspects of American history. One participant did not answer and stated that the question was too broad to answer.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

Lay theories are implicit, intuitive, and common sense theories and beliefs (Hong et. al., 2001).

The current study focused on applying the concept of lay theories to liberation, and looked at how ‘the recovery of historical memory’ (Martin-Baro, 1994) was exhibited by the historical monuments, the George Bush Library and the Alamo Mission. The purpose of this study was to determine how historical location can influence one’s feelings on liberation and what examples from history they pull on to support their lay theory.

In order to do this, participants were interviewed outside the George Bush Library or the Alamo. I then analyzed the responses to each open-ended question and constructed them into groups by similarity in word usage and overall ideas. Once grouped into respective themes, I then analyzed the responses in regard to location. Finally, I examined the examples of specific people, places, or events from history that came to the participant’s mind for each respective question.

Overall, I did not see a significant variance in the interview responses between locations. The most common themes were expressed at both the George Bush Library and the Alamo.

Participants utilized the similar lay theories of liberation at both the George Bush Library And the Alamo Mission. Historical monuments had an influence on one’s feelings on liberation and this is seen when the participant gives specific examples for the questions. Once again, there was not a significant variance in the historical examples participants gave at the George Bush Library and those given at the Alamo. When asked about liberation, participants would pull on examples of liberations via war or personal freedoms. When participants were asked to give examples that

came to mind about resistance, rebellion, protest, and riot, examples of social movements that lead to liberation were given to support their lay theories.

Participants pulled on specific examples of people, places, and events from history and current events. These interviews were conducted in Spring 2015, in the midst of the Ferguson, Missouri riots, and before the Supreme Court decision on marriage equality. Common historic examples included the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Berlin Wall, the Civil Rights Movement, and various riots.

This study on lay theories of liberation has given us a basis for future studies. In the future, a larger sample size should be utilized; I believe that there will be more variance in responses between historic monuments with more participants. Another consideration for a future study is to compare these interviews conducted in Spring 2015 to future interviews. This would allow us to see how national and international current events influence participant responses. The examples participants use to support their lay theories may change over time.

The results of this study did not support my hypothesis. There are various factors, such as too small a sample size, that may have contributed to this. Using this lay theories approach allows us to have a better understanding of lay person's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors in regards to liberation.

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## APPENDIX A

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. In this study, feel free to say whatever comes to mind; there are no right or wrong answers, only your honest thoughts and opinions.

1. Would you tell me a little bit about why are you are at the George Bush Library today?
  - a. *[If visiting the library]* Did you have any expectations about what you might feel or think about while here? What, if anything, did you think about or feel? Have you visited any other campus monuments or memorials today? Which ones?
2. What comes to mind when you think of *liberation*?
  - a. Do any specific people come to mind?
  - b. Do any specific events come to mind?
  - c. Do any specific places come to mind?
  - d. Do any specific actions come to mind?
3. If you had to define “liberation” what would your definition be?
  - a. Given this definition, do any additional people, places, or events come to mind?
4. What is the *opposite meaning* or antonym of the word *liberation*?
  - a. Do any specific people come to mind when you think of [participant antonym]? *If no antonym given for previous response, use repression*
  - b. Do any specific places come to mind when you think of [participant antonym]?
5. Do you think [*participant antonym*] has a good or bad connotation?
6. What would you call someone who was fighting against [*participant antonym*]?
  - a. Who or what comes to mind when you think of [*participant prior answer*]? *If no answer given for previous response, use resistance leader*
7. What comes to mind when you think of the word *resistance*?
  - a. Do any specific people come to mind?
  - b. Do any specific events come to mind?
  - c. Do any specific places come to mind?
  - d. Do any specific actions come to mind?
8. What comes to mind when you think of the word *rebellion*?
  - a. Do any specific people come to mind?
  - b. Do any specific events come to mind?
  - c. Do any specific places come to mind?
  - d. Do any specific actions come to mind?

9. What comes to mind when you think of the word *protest*?
- Do any specific people come to mind?
  - Do any specific events come to mind?
  - Do any specific places come to mind?
  - Do any specific actions come to mind?

10. What comes to mind when you think of the word *riot*?
- Do any specific people come to mind?
  - Do any specific events come to mind?
  - Do any specific places come to mind?
  - Do any specific actions come to mind?

11. What are the most important people, places, or events in American History?

**Demographic Questions**

- What is your gender?
- What is your occupation?
- What country and state are you from? Is your current residence urban or rural?
- How would you describe your political party affiliation?
- How would you describe your racial or ethnic background?
- How would you describe your social class background?
- How would you describe your educational background?

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?