

IN MEMORIAM

Fernando González Rey (1949–2019)



Fernando González Rey was a Cuban psychologist, scholar, and educator whose intellectual legacy offers a new, complex, and influential understanding of subjectivity from a cultural–historical standpoint. He published 38 books, more than 80 book chapters, and 135 scientific articles published in five languages (Spanish, Portuguese, English, Russian, and French). González Rey’s work is characterized by its breadth, depth, and creativity and contributes mainly to the fields of cultural–historical psychology, qualitative research, education, psychotherapy, and human health.

González Rey was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1949. His life was marked by different worlds that rarely interact. His lower middle class family, from both his father’s and mother’s sides, were Spanish immigrants. Surrounded by people of strong character who were hard workers, González Rey, an only child, was the first member of his family to devote himself to studies and become an academic. During his university studies he was part of the Communist Youth and subsequently entered the ranks of the Communist Party of Cuba. During his time in these political organizations he

was often characterized by his capacity to reflect on and constructively criticize what he considered to be bureaucratic and dogmatic policies and practices.

González Rey graduated from the University of Havana as a psychologist in 1973. Even as an undergraduate student he was vocally critical of the fragmented psychology dominant at the time, divided according to specific fields of application but with little capacity for articulation and consideration of complex psychic systems. He earned his PhD in psychology (1979), along with a doctor in sciences degree (1987), in the former Soviet Union.

González Rey was especially influenced by L. S. Vygotsky, S. L. Rubinstein, L. I. Bozhovich, and V. E. Chudnovsky in terms of his initial theoretical focus on personality from a cultural–historical perspective. His PhD thesis was supervised by Chudnovsky in the laboratory led by Bozhovich at the Moscow Institute of General and Pedagogical Psychology. Gradually, González Rey started to advance the concept of communication and to criticize the limits of the dominant concept of activity in Soviet psychology. The link between communication and personality was developed in his thesis for the doctor in sciences degree at the Institute of Psychology at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union directed by B. F. Lomov. The concept of communication in his work was also an important bridge between personality and social psychology, which was developing in this institute by that time.

González Rey’s orientation toward social psychology, which began in Moscow, continued its development as a result of his active participation in the Critical Social Psychology Movement in Latin America from the mid-1980s. He worked collectively on Latin American social and political psychology alongside other well-known Latin American scholars and activists, such as I. Martín-Baró, S. Lane, M. Montero, J. M. Salazar, and B. Jiménez. This group claimed the importance of advancing a critical social psychology that takes issues specific to Latin America seriously, instead of the traditional mimetic reproduction of North American and European models that characterized psychology on the continent. In this process, González Rey defended the importance of the concepts of subject and personality for social psychology. Gradually, he moved his theoretical emphasis away from the concept of personality to a broader conceptual definition of subjectivity. In 1991, the continental recognition of the significant contribution of

González Rey's body of work led to his being awarded the Interamerican Psychology Prize.

With his book *Epistemología Cualitativa y Subjetividad* (Qualitative Epistemology and Subjectivity; 1997), González Rey advanced his previous works to develop a theory of subjectivity within a cultural–historical framework, along with an epistemological platform for its development that he named *qualitative epistemology*. His research fields expanded, as did his dialogue with other theoretical perspectives, such as social representations theory, psychoanalysis, and social constructionism. The core of his theory of subjectivity is a new ontological definition of subjectivity that defines it as a symbolic–emotional system. The symbolic–emotional unity transcends the traditional intrapsychic and individual reductionism that has characterized the use of the concept “subjectivity” in psychology and other social sciences. At the same time, this unity overcomes the social reductionism that has prevailed within cultural–historical psychology, which has traditionally associated psychological processes with reflections or internalized social operations. His definition of *subjectivity* emphasizes the idea that individual and social spheres can be integrated as “realities” that share a subjective character, in a contradictory way, without one being reduced to the other.

From his point of view, subjectivity has a culturally, socially, and historically located genesis. However, it represents a generative system, rather than an epiphenomenon of other dimensions. This aspect allows the emergence of individuals, groups, and institutions as subjects of human practices. In this sense, González Rey's theory of subjectivity emerges as a critical theoretical framework in relation to dominant psychology because it opens a new avenue to explain singular individual and social human creations as inseparable from broader social dynamics.

The development of the theory of subjectivity catalyzed a new set of research programs and publications in which the unity between theory, epistemology, and methodology became central. Qualitative epistemology and its methodological expression, constructive–interpretative methodology, were constructed and developed by him, respectively, as the epistemological and the methodological approach for this endeavor. This epistemological–methodological platform revitalizes science as a living and creative production by considering the researcher as a subject of knowledge construction. Also, this approach emphasizes the production of knowledge as (a) dialogic, (b) constructive–interpretative, and (c) oriented to the legitimization of the singular as a legitimate instance of its production. An important feature of this perspective is the rupture with historical dichotomies, such as between data collection and data analysis, as well as between research and professional action. González Rey's epistemological and methodological proposal contributes toward a qualitative approach that considers human

creativity and reflexivity crucial dimensions of scientific construction.

González Rey was president of the Cuban Psychologists' Society (1986–1995), dean of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Havana (1985–1990), and vice rector of the University of Havana (1990–1995). Throughout his academic career, he was a visiting professor at several institutions in different parts of the world, such as the London School of Economics (London, United Kingdom), École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris, France), Monash University (Melbourne, Australia), City University of New York (New York, New York.), Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Madrid, Spain), Universidad Autónoma de México (Mexico City, Mexico), Universidad de Valencia (Valencia, Spain), Universidad de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires, Argentina), Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico (San Jose, Puerto Rico), and Universidade de São Paulo (Ribeirão Preto, Brazil).

In 2000, after spending 4 years as a visiting professor at the University of Brasilia, for political reasons he was prevented from returning to Cuba, as he wished. He was also removed from the Cuban Communist Party. In this process, he was forced to settle in Brazil. Along with his academic partner and wife, Albertina Mitjás Martínez, he then worked in various Brazilian universities, having the University Center of Brasilia as his main workplace.

In addition to his prolific academic trajectory, Fernando was a powerful source of personal inspiration for all those who had the chance to share vibrant discussions with him on a broad range of topics. Students as well as academic colleagues used to say he was not only a psychology teacher and supervisor but an authentic master of life. His energetic way of defending his ideas and provoking different expressions of commonsense understandings was always accompanied by a generous educational orientation as well as a profound connection to life in its diversity and beauty.

González Rey died on March 26, 2019, in Sao Paulo. He is survived by his wife, Albertina Mitjás Martínez; his four children; and six grandchildren. He passed away at the height of his intellectual productivity after bravely fighting prostate cancer for 7 years. However, he managed to endure this experience through his “philosophy of life,” as he used to say. Despite many surgeries and treatments with several side effects, Fernando kept his motivation for writing, teaching, and supervising until his last days. For him, science and theory were passionate human creations and lively systems that always have the capacity to transcend current boundaries. The academic legacy he left us continues, as alive as the memory of the wonderful and generous human being he was and still is for us.

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