Society of Individuals or Community Strength: Community psychology at risk in at-risk societies

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This paper discusses a critical perspective on community psychology intervention. Consideration of diversity, power and politics guide the definition of crafts of community intervention.

'Hyper-', 'late-', 'post-', 'liquid-' or 'modern-' societies can be described as *complex* in the sense that they seem impossible to comprehend on the basis of a single organizing principle, as used to seem to be the case in the past when traditional societal organizations were apparently more stable, rigid and *simple*, i.e., less complex, and more predictable.

To give an example, the medieval period, or the Middle Ages as it was more commonly known, could be characterised in terms of a simple descriptor of its social organization - the hegemony of Christian church and the grand meta-narrative that entailed: 'suffering during life in order to deserve heaven after death'. For a wide range of analytical purposes, this single statement appeared capable of giving a generally satisfactory account of the all-inclusive religious-political medieval European 'project', such that medieval art, culture, power, education etc. could all be understood on the basis of this heuristic descriptor. In *simple* societies, very simple mechanisms of the division of labour and distribution of knowledge produced identities that were 'socially predefined and profiled to a high degree' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 165).

Comprehensive understanding of contemporary societies, characterised as they are by paradox, contradiction, tensions and developmental trends, apparently working in divergent and sometimes even opposite directions, appears much harder to accomplish (Lipovetsky & Charles, 2004). Higher order complex social systems attain levels of differentiation and integration involving dialectical processes of self-regulation wherein opposite elements are not only possible but essential.

Highly complex forms of social organization, such as those found in present Western societies, cannot be accounted for in linear terms. Researchers from different disciplines have formulated the issue in terms of the individualisation of contemporary societies. To take an example, the historical development from clan to individual via tribe, enlarged family, nuclear family, downsized, 'atypical' family and the quasi-mathematical notion of the singular family composed of only one self-referential and self-operating family unit (Baudrillard, 1990; Lipovetsky, 1983) illustrates how social differentiation and complexity has increased over time, to the point where coherent construction of daily life worlds has become an increasingly demanding and decreasingly accessible challenge involving an anything but linear process. We are not born human, we become: constructed by historical lines of force.

Psychological and social survival depends on a degree of coherence in representations of the world that permit meaning-making, i.e., a perception of relationships between events, phenomena, individuals, groups or institutions that allows a minimal basis for prediction and anticipation of possible and plausible futures. Yet a growing number of individuals find it difficult to construct a reasonably coherent understanding of the social world in which they live due to: acceleration in rhythms of change; being constantly deluged by global information; erosion of assumptions of the traditionally 'taken-for-granted' (e.g. the gradual replacement of the assumption of the right to work by the conviction that employment is increasingly a privilege); reducing expectations with regard to social protection in relation to health, unemployment or retirement; diminished sense of membership of groups and communities; turbulent, uncertain, insecure, risky living conditions; policies which initially appear benevolent but which are revealed as individualistic and victim-blaming (e.g., active employment or lifelong learning policies); the double bind of inclusion policies, devices and interventions which create new forms of stigma and marginalisation and growing areas of social exclusion. All these contribute to ever-growing difficulty in constructing coherent representations of an at least minimally predictable world and result in unequally accessible and unequally distributed meaning–making potential and thus inequitably distributed security and trust.

Many contemporary social thinkers regard individualisation as not only one of the major indicators of the high level of differentiation and complexity of present social organisations but also a touchstone of regularity which can render the precarious social world coherently 'knowable' (Bauman, 2001; Benasayag, 2004; Lasch, 1979; Lipovetsky, 1983; Lipovetsky & Charles, 2004; Martuccelli, 2002; Perelman, 2005; Twenge, 2006).

In line with Berger and Luckmann's seminal conception (1966) of the dialectical relationship between macro and micro-social, the increasing complexity of contemporary societies has been claimed to lead to the emergence of uniquely subtle modes of control. Whilst some thinkers (e.g. Foucault, 1975) have emphasised the role of sanctions, coercion and punishment in constructing the normalization, control and conformity characteristic of past, although very

recent, disciplinary and more normative and collectively referenced societies, others have emphasised the roles of persuasion, negotiation and manipulation (Deleuze, 1990a; 1990b), consented manipulation (Joule & Beauvois, 1998) and seduction (Baudrillard, 1979; Lipovetsky, 1983) as the individual control processes typical of present more open, flexible and 'cool' individualised societies. Whatever the detail of the process, one consequence has been the construction of the individual, autonomous, reflexive, self-conscious (and self-sufficient) subject, entitled to a growing range of rights, including, ironically, the right to escape from societal and state control. Not at all coincidentally, this constructed subject is complemented by an extended series of self-referential constructs (e.g., self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, ego, identity, self-control, self-organization, and idiosyncratic cognitive structure) which characterise the constructed 'individualised individual' in the most profound sense. Here psychology is seen to both construct 'known' psychological dimensions of 'reality' and to itself be a symptom of constructed psychologised-therapeutic cultures, which have been designated by some (cf. Lipovetsky, 1983) as 'psy-societies'. The flip side of this coin is the isolated and victimised person left to him/herself and blamed for his/her social exclusion, unemployment or 'othered' in myriad other ways.

Mistrust, uncertainty, insecurity, uncontrollability and unpredictability are not only the hallmark of contemporary individualised societies but are arguably the *zeitgeist* of a *risk society* (Beck, 1992; Coimbra, 2005; Francescato, Mebane & Tomai, 2005; Luhmann, 1993/2008; Perelman, 2005) in which there is mutual distrust on the part of, on the one hand, individual citizens and, on the other, those within State institutions and organisations associated with social control (school, health services, fiscal administration, courts, video-surveillance devices etc.) (Baudrillard, 1979; Luhmann, 1968/ 2006; Marris, 1996; Pécaud, 2005).

Contemporary complex societies are also characterised by rupture with tradition with respect to: accelerating social change, unremitting scientific and technological development, ubiquitous consumerism and the disappearance of common cultural/collective reference points. Under these conditions the historicity of human existence loses its normative power, leading, in psychoanalytic terms, to a fatherless culture, and societally structured habits, manifested in social structures and norms over many generations, being replaced by new modes of social life and interaction (Lipovetsky, 1992; Tedesco, 2002). The net result is the appearance of a 'brand new world' in which new (and less new) media are tightly articulated with consumption, marketing and advertising (Stiegler, 2008a). The consequences of such de-traditionalization processes (Martuccelli, 2002) are evident at all levels of social life, but especially in family, school and community contexts (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tedesco, 2002). The cumulative effect of all this is generalized 'community deficit', dramatic erosion of community ties and social support networks, resulting in societies of individuals, which are to paraphrase Norbert Elias (1987/1991) incompatible with community strength.

The weakening of community as a form of social organisation and the substitution of individualisation has a long history accompanied by the gradual disappearance of successive grand meta-narratives: from the Christian-Jewish ones to more recent narratives founded on democracy. The disappearance of these grand meta-narratives and emergence of other individual, autonomously or hetero-supported, life narratives has changed the means through which personal existence can be rendered meaningful.

Parallel to this trend is the historical process, typical of market-oriented cultures, of the assimilation of desire through bureaucratic rationalisation and the technologisation of the human, which has only been exaggerated by the transition from production-based to consumption-based economies and the recent transformation of the individual producer-consumer into a market commodity (Stiegler, 2008b). 'Welcome to the desert of the real!' said Morpheus, in the film 'The Matrix', to Neo, the protagonist, indicating the adequacy of the image of the *desert* to express the poiesis of the systematic destruction of that which resists technology and Zizek took this salutation to illustrate the cultural symbolic misery which is the supreme reward of materialisation and hypostatisation (Zizek, 2002/2005, p. 37). The desert as a relevant signifier of contemporaneity will be revisited later in this article from Hanna Arendt's (2005) perspective but for now it is sufficient to note that symbolic losses have frequently been associated with the desert metaphor (Le Clézio, 1987; Pasolini, 1964; Steiner, 2003, Stiegler, 2008a; 2008b; Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999; Wenders, 1984).

The 'lost' community?

Community psychology and community psychological intervention cannot afford to dispense with the level of analysis which enables the construction of a maximally clear and critical frame of reference regarding the larger cultural and political context within which their objects of study and intervention are inevitably immersed. Ordinary conceptualisations of the individual subject do not address some of his/her main features in contemporary societies. Indeed, community may not exist in way we used to think of it, reduced, as is sometimes the case, to mere territorial space.

Community is a rather ambiguous concept which has, due to its positioning within both lay and expert discourses - including social scientific and psychosocial discourses - a wide variety of, sometimes contradictory, meanings, serving the interests of a wide variety of ideologically distinct interest groups. Nevertheless, a major challenge stems from the dramatic transformations which community has suffered in contemporary Western individualised societies. Putnam (1995; 2000), among other authors (e.g., Généreux, 2006), has referred to the collapse of community. The gradual melting of the 'social glue' which community used to provide has led to disconnected, disaffected and more vulnerable inner-oriented individual subjects, uprooted from family, friends, community and social structures. Because social bonds in general - and secure attachment relationships in particular - are the reliable predictors of

psychological well-being, it is clear that community intervention is required. In addition, the less social capital a community has, the greater risk of high unemployment, domestic violence, social exclusion etc. Beyond individualisation, factors such as economic and labour market changes, urbanisation, consumerism, mobility, migration and demographic changes also contribute to the construction of socio-cultural ghettos characterised by mass unemployment, impoverishment and material hardship :

It is also interesting to note how the growing individualisation and privatisation of life has been paralleled by mythologizing of (lost) community. The revival of community life is sometimes positioned as a panacea in both personal and societal terms, and there has been a considerable growth of research on topics such as social support, social networks, social capital, social solidarity, sense of community,... even if there is recognition of their diversity of formats and effects. As Putnam (2007) puts it,

> not all networks have exactly the same effects: friends may improve health, whereas civic groups strengthen democracy. Moreover, although networks can powerfully affect our ability to get things done, nothing guarantees that what gets done through networks will be socially beneficial. (p. 138)

There is a tendency to address the community as a more or less defined 'entity' – the 'us myth' as Weisenfeld (1996) puts it – and to emphasise mutual care and support of community members through (positive) interaction, downplaying diversity of interests and conflict as crucial, inevitable and desirable elements of community life (Montero, 2004). One of the signs of this community mythology (beyond social science) is the emergence of the 'new urbanism' movement which aims to plan 'good places to live' which would easily generate a 'sense of community' (Sander, 2002; Talen, 1999). However, these new communities do not necessarily guarantee equity and participation and are subject to intense criticism regarding their production of highly homogenous and fragmented, if pretty and green, neighbourhoods, which lessen diversity and generate social exclusion like private condominiums do (Al-Hindi & Till, 2001; Anacker, 2007; Talen, 1999). Idealist experimentalism might be following the trendy path of illusory idyllic thematic parks.

The mythologizing of 'community' ignores: access to social networks being neither egalitarian nor fair (Lin, 1999); the role that communities have played throughout history and around the world in the control, exclusion and oppression of scapegoats (Girard, 1982); the well-known ghetto effect (Law, 1991); classic social stigma (Goffman, 1963) and 'othering' on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious or political beliefs or whatever quality a given community values as distinctive of its identity. Actually, there are abundant examples of communities organising themselves to control, punish and persecute individuals or groups conceived of as 'different'. Be it the witch hunt of modernity, the anti-communist crusade of McCarthyism, wars in former Yugoslavia or Rwanda or the many contemporary organised manifestations of

sexism, homophobia or racism, communities can be dangerous places in which to live. Even if we do not consider extremes, anyone who has experienced the benefits and blessings of living in a small community in terms of recognition, support and mutuality also acknowledges that social control and surveillance are obvious downsides. The 'lost community' discourse tends to mystify the fact that communities – as probably everything in life – are not inherently good. A golden age of paradisiacal community is no more than an idle fantasy and critical perspectives on the concept of community have relevant implications for community intervention.

The crafts of community intervention

This critical perspective on the roles individuals and communities assume in contemporary societies is, from the point of view of the authors, absolutely essential but some community intervention professionals might be overwhelmed by apparently excessive criticism, negativism and false relativism and confuse critical praxis with inhibition to intervene in order to transform social reality. It would be cynical to give up on efforts to intervene on the grounds that positive community change is unlikely to happen, occasionally counter-productive or even, perversely, that it often reproduces social inequalities.

A critical approach should, however, be committed to axiological and political principles, impose a duty to reflect upon and question, as well as to intervene in practice. An unavoidable dimension of conflict is present in each and every project and has to be recognised, in spite of the discomfort and insecurity it might cause community professionals.

An attempt follows to explicate four crafts of community intervention (Menezes, 2007).

Community intervention requires the *craft of relationships*: it depends heavily on the capacity to develop secure and trusting relationships with different people within a community. Intervention is not implemented *against* others or *in spite of* others but only makes sense if done *with* others (Kelly, 1968) and it is this distinctive quality which guarantees legitimacy and is, simultaneously, a significant predictor of effectiveness. It is through relationships that professionals gain the right to be involved in change processes with people and their communities. This is why relationships are both a strategy and a context of community intervention which cannot be betrayed in the name of results. Haste is the enemy of secure and trusting relationships which inevitably, as the fox in Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince (1943/1999) would say, take time to develop. The dissemination of a project's results should be determined by the rhythm of the relationship with the community and not dictated by external interest groups, including funders. In an individualised society, trust and security are unevenly distributed resources and the emphasis on relationships is essential for both the recognition and the involvement of the community, without which any project is condemned (quite rightly we would add) to failure.

The *craft of becoming irrelevant* implies an acknowledgment that there is only one real way to empower: to actually share power from day one. If trust and security are limited resources in communities, so is power, making it even more important that professionals do not reproduce the inequality and exclusion that people repeatedly experience in their everyday lives. Professionals should resist the temptation to act as community rescuers or as leaders without whom change would never have happened. Personal and community autonomy, critical consciousness and empowerment are the goals of community intervention, so rather than trying to give the *right* answers, we should try to ensure the right questions are asked and support individuals and communities in answering them themselves and finding paths for change and improvement in their own terms. Being a catalyst of this process is difficult but change depends on the catalyst as well as on the community – and there are neither fairies nor gods to account for community change (Montero, 2004).

The *craft of pluralism* acknowledges that effective community intervention depends on the capacity to recognize that many 'others' exist within a community, to appreciate the various communities within a 'community' and to find ways to ensure their diverse perspectives and voices are expressed and heard. Acknowledging diversity and conflict within a community as not only inevitable but as a significant sign of its vitality is mandatory if intervention is not to be based on exclusion and silencing of minorities and less-popular points of view. Moreover, dissent and conflict should be recognized and valued as contributions to an inclusive and comprehensive vision of, and effective action upon, community life. The craft of pluralism involves acknowledgement of the inadequacy of a (one) truth realist position and is consistent with constructivist or social-constructionist alternative approaches (Gergen, 1991; Gergen, 2006; Gergen, Schrader & Gergen, 2008), which suggest convergence of ontology, epistemology and the politics of knowledge and replace truth by viability. Outcomes of personal, interpersonal and community structures and processes of knowledge co-construction find their validation in the individual and community action they facilitate. Validation of pluralism is not so much an issue of an axiological imperative or an option (not to mention political correctness) as a prerequisite for emancipatory, effective, community psychological intervention.

Last but by no means least, community intervention should also intentionally be the *craft of making politics by other means*. The significance of a political perspective has two fundamental consequences. The first was enunciated by Martín-Baró (1986) as he urged us to put our psychological knowledge at the service of people who are oppressed, disempowered and excluded – thus ensuring that community intervention is actively committed to personal well-being and social justice (Francescato & Tomai, 2001; Prado, 2002; Prilleltensky, 2004). Psychology has no doubt deserved Hanna Arendt's (2005) criticism of being the science of the desert in a society of growing worldlessness (a most eloquent expression of the symbolic misery already

referred to above):

when we lose the faculty to judge – to suffer and condemn – we begin to think that there is something wrong with us if we cannot live under the conditions of desert life. Insofar as psychology tries to 'help' us, it helps us 'adjust' to those conditions, taking away our only hope, namely that we, who are not of the desert though we live in it, are able to transform it into a human world. Psychology turns everything topsy-turvy: precisely because we suffer under desert conditions we are still human and still intact; the danger lies in becoming true inhabitants of the desert and feeling at home in it.' (p. 201).

It is accurate to say that, recurrently, psychological intervention has produced technocratic adaptation to current social conditions without questioning the morality and justice of those conditions, including how they reproduce inequalities and generate oppression and exclusion (Albee, 1987, 1996, 2000; Albee, Joffe & Dusenbury, 1988; Francescato & Tomai, 2001; Montero, 2003, 2004; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). As we put psychology at the service of those who are victimised by these conditions we are, and this time beyond doubt, 'giving psychology away' (Miller, 1969), as we take sides in favour of the empowerment, autonomy and development of people and their communities: a political project which is legitimised both theoretically and empirically, as research reveals the devastating psychological and societal consequences of lack of power, of lack of self-determination, of complexity and of flexibility.

The second consequence is that a political perspective should saturate our work. Again following Arendt (2005), worldlessness is a consequence of the death of politics (Aron, 1955; Camus, 1951; Jost, 2006; Lipset, 1959 [1994]; Scott-Smith, 2002). Politics inevitably emerges in the space between individuals and groups in specific contexts of social-cultural forms of organization. It is, in a way, the lack of community as the space-between-individuals that leads to the inescapable vanishing of politics in contemporary, hyper, post, liquid modern societies. Ultimately, the contemporary emphasis on the creation of an 'inclusive consensus' (Mouffe, 2002, p. 1) completely ignores the (inevitable) social conflict intrinsic to what Walzer (2005, p. 629) would call 'the unavoidable political question: Which side are you on?'.

In this paper we have attempted to critically question community as an object of knowledge and transformation. The critique was based on a psycho-social-political analysis that illuminated two major tendencies of macro-micro-social dialectics: individualisation and community deficit. Upon these underpinnings an original and integrative proposal for psychological praxis was outlined: the crafts of community intervention.

The extension of the term 'psychological' was, in this context, greater than that of more traditional uses of the term: a sort of spatial-temporal-substantive enlargement of what is meant by 'psychological', overcoming intra-individual and individual borders so that it might be possible to integrate relational, group,

institutional and community dimensions. Beyond the necessary coordination between synchronic and diachronic axes of psychological functioning and development (not forgetting the complicity between contexts – proximal and distal – and processes and outcomes of psychological development), an important implication of the four crafts is that psychological development is not the monopoly of the individual subject. Relations, groups, organisations and institutions are also involved in a historical-developmental process. So is community. The psychological should be envisaged as a dimension of human, social, cultural, political, historical and economic realities. In all these realities it is possible to identify aspects and dimensions of a psychological nature that should be recognized in intervention processes.

Finally, the crafts proposed connect with, and are a response to, individualisation and consequences of community deficit. Rupture with tradition, the crisis of trust and the assimilation of the incalculable by the calculable can be considered relevant to making decisions concerning each particular community intervention but instead of a content-orientation, we assume a process-orientation.

The authors hope that this paper might provide a useful anchor (not necessarily the only one) for the process of elaborating, implementing and evaluating community intervention projects and an agenda for further research in the community realm. The emphasis on critical competence and responsibility as part of the intervention process has a triple objective: to enhance the effectiveness of community interventions; and to approach and integrate the complexity of the 'object' of work – a community who speaks; and to assert the relevance of highlighting the political dimension of community intervention and its inevitably conflictual nature.

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