Communities in Context: Undefinitions, Multiplicity and Cultural Difference

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Abstract

After showing the plurality of notions of community, which inhabit the discipline, it is argued that theorisation on the concept of community needs to acknowledge and include the complexity encountered by psychologists in their community practices. Thus, departing from a representational logic, and resting on some empirical considerations, the paper will explore: a) the contextual diversity of meanings of community; b) the sometimes fractured, diverse character of communities, with blurred and variable limits and changing and contested identities: c) communities' relational character, constructed through historical contexts and local practices -including community psychologists' own perspectives. Moreover, it is argued that dialogic relations between members and non-members, and capturing the meaning of everyday situations, are good ways of making sense of identities and concepts of community, which can be used strategically by the community, in order to produce social changes.
Keywords: Community definitions, cultural diversity, complexity, local meanings, uncertainty.

Comunidades en Contexto:
Indefiniciones, Multiplicidad y Diferencias Culturales

Compendio

Después de mostrar la pluralidad de nociones de comunidad que habitan la disciplina, se argumenta que la teorización sobre el concepto necesita reconocer e incluir la complejidad encontrada por lo/as psicólogo/as en sus prácticas comunitarias. Partiendo de una lógica representacional, y apoyándose en algunas condiciones empíricas, este artículo explora: a) la diversidad contextual de los significados del concepto de comunidad; b) el carácter diverso, a veces fracturado, de las comunidades, con límites variables y borrosos y con identidades cambiantes y controvertidas. C) el carácter relacional de las comunidades; construido a través de contextos históricos y prácticas locales, incluyendo las propias perspectivas de lo/as psicólogo/as comunitario/as. Se argumenta también que las relaciones dialógicas entre miembros y no miembros, y el capturar el significado de las situaciones cotidianas, son buenos modos de dar sentido de identidades y conceptos de comunidad, que pueden ser usados estratégicamente por la comunidad, a fin de producir cambios sociales.
Palabras clave: Definiciones de comunidad, diversidad cultural, complejidad, significados locales, incertidumbre.

The concept of community has played a central role in community psychology. On the one hand, it has allowed the expression of the discipline's concerns for social changes, present throughout its history. Indeed, the compromise with social justice, and with the egalitarian distribution of psychological and social resources, motivated community psychology from its beginning (Iscoe, 1977a; Rappaport, 1977, 1987; Reiff, 1975; Scribner, 1968). These concerns, which establish connections between the discipline and feminism (Fine, 1994; Francescato, 1977; García González, 1993; Mulvey, 1988; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996), have arisen through action with collectives, which have usually been ignored or made silent (Escovar, 1977; Rodríguez, 1981; Serrano-García & Bond, 1994; Thorne, 1973). It is in this context that community psychology, resting strongly on the notion of 'community', drew attention to and denounced the oppression and unfairness of those practices, opposing the exclusion of those collectives. And this denunciation has been the more obvious in community social psychology as practised in Latin America, given particular socio-economic and political contexts (Lane, 1996; Lane & Sawaia, 1991; Montero, 1984; Serrano-García & López, 1994; Wiesenfeld, 1996). Thus, community psychology was constituted as a transforming practice (Montero, 1996), and a politically committed answer to the needs of our present society.

At the same time, while emphasising action at the level proper to the 'community', community psychology also expressed dissatisfaction about how such problems were being dealt with from other perspectives, which were imposing measures on people, 'from up to bottom', without taking into account their needs. Therefore, the concept of 'community' enabled to question the role of the professional (Montero, 1996), while articulating an alternative approach: community psychology. Thus, the concept of community has helped to construct the identity of the discipline, allowing community psychologists to express who we are, what we do, what our aspirations are, what implications and effects our practices have. That is, conceptualising 'community' has enabled a reflexive process, common to different disciplines and social movements, helping to make explicit the theoretical assumptions of community psychologists.

The centrality of the concept of community inclined an important part of community social psychologists to discuss – drawing from different social sources - the concept and its definition (cf.: Bell & Newby, 1971; Bernard, 1973; Bloom, 1973, 1984; Doyle, 1975; Dunham, 1977; Elias, 1974; García, Giuliani, & Wiesenfeld, 1994; Heller, 1989; Klein, 1968; Lee & Newby, 1983; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Montero, 1996; Newbrough, 1973, 1974; Sánchez-Vidal, 1991; Sanders, 1966; Sarason, 1974; Sawaia, 1996; Warren, 1965). Such attempts have often taken the form of taxonomies, and lists of characteristics and functions that inform communities. As the following examples illustrate:

emotional links, personal intimacy, moral engagement, social cohesion, temporal continuity, territoriality (Bernard, 1973); production-distribution-consumption, socialisation, social control, social participation and mutual support (Warren, 1963, 1965); geographical area, frequent social relations, shared advantages and benefits, mains and needs, some form of organisation, identity and sense of belonging, historical and dynamic character, level of integration more concrete than that of society or social class, and wider than that of a group (Montero, 1998); psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974); geographical localisation, temporal stability, common facilities and services and material resources, structure and social system, a psychological component (Sánchez-Vidal, 1991).

However, in spite of its central role, as yet no consensus on the basic definition of community has been achieved. Bell y Newby (1971) have said: "the more [the sociologist] attempts to define in his [sic] own terms, the more elusively does the essence of it seem to escape him. The concept of community has been the concern of sociologists for more than two hundred years, yet a satisfactory definition of it in sociological terms appears as remote as ever." (p. 21)

Hillery, in 1955, analyzing the definitions of community employed by sociologists, found sixteen concepts formulated in ninety-four different definitions. His conclusion was that there was one element, which could "be found in all concepts, and (its mention seems obvious) it is specifies merely to facilitate a positive delineation of the degree of homogeneity: al the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement" (p. 117). Some years later, he said "the significant question concerns the nature of social groups, not whether a ninety-fifth definition of community is possible" (Hillery, 1969, p. 4).

We are left with a multiplicity of definitions that, after all, does not even delimit completely what we are trying to define, since most of the characteristics are not only shared by communities, but also by different kinds of small and large groups, social movements, and even nations (Elias, 1974). This plurality, however, is a problem only if one expects that there should be an only and accurate definition. Or, differently put, it is problematic only under the implicit logic of definitions: a representational logic, which assumes that there is a direct correspondence between a definition and a real object, where the definition simply reflects those characteristics inherent to the object –in this case, the community. Such logic becomes apparent, for instance, when Sánchez-Vidal (1991) asks for "a definition, which identifies the community in a substantial and exclusive way." (p. 69)

The problem with a representational logic is that it may be impairing for the field, since it does not make justice to all the complexities community psychologists encounter in their practices, leading to frequent demands for attention to the variability and uncertainty of meanings which this logic does not allow. Neither does it recognize the plurality of the notion (Joas, 1993). In this sense, the emphasis on the multiplicity of definitions challenge the univocal sense of the concept, and bring awareness of the plurality of meanings that different

people attribute to the concept of community (García et al., 1994; Montero, 1998). Put differently, this multiplicity questions the representational logic itself, for it shows that it is not self-evident what characteristics are essential to a community; rather, these always depend on some criteria held by the theorist. That is, a definition implies active processes of selection, choosing and excluding, highlighting and ignoring, until being able to state some common features characterizing all communities, regardless of their peculiarities.

It is important to bear in mind the constructed nature and the multiplicity involved in defining and conceptualizing community. Those definitions are not neutral. They condition how people will approach and relate to communities and their members; how the relationships between a community and other groups will be conceived; how the issue of power and domination will be dealt with; what measures will be thought to cause changes; who will the interlocutors be: how changes and historicity will be conceived, etc. Each definition, then, will have its political effects. It is clearly not the same to consider communities to be constituted by 'neighborhood relations', by 'co-operative relations' or by 'power relationships'. And this is all the more important for, as Montero (1998) points out, all interventions deal with a concept of community, be it more or less explicit.

In the light of these concerns, this paper will explore the changing, blurred, contested character that communities also encompass – together with other more fix, definite and unified moments. Moreover, in line with constructionist proposals, another aim of this paper will be to bring up the contingent, local, contextual nature of community, trying to capture the more dynamic conception of community that the field wants to express (Montero, 1996, 1998). To do so, I shall draw on some empirical considerations. Some of them stem from a community program, in which, as part of a larger project by a cross-cultural research and child protection team from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (DEHISI), I participated in co-operation with a Gypsy Association of Badalona (Barcelona) (Crespo, Pallí & Lalueza, 2002; Lalueza & Crespo, 1996). Other examples will be drawn from situations in which the collective dimension remains vital.

Cultural Differences, Local Meanings

This section will try to draw attention towards the possibility that cultural diversity involves variability in the meanings and constitutions of community. This idea touches the sensibility of the field, for contextual diversity has been a major concern for community psychology since its origins. Indeed, the need to understand individuals and communities within their sociocultural contexts, and a respect for cultural differences in values, beliefs, contexts has been stressed (Blanco, 1988; Heller & Monahan, 1977; Kim, 1981; Rappaport, 1977; Sarason, 1971; Seidman & Rappaport, 1986). And although much remains

to be done (Tricket, 1996), efforts have been adding up (Birman, 1998; Gidron, Chesler & Chessney, 1991; Herek et al., 1998; Hughes, Seidman & Williams, 1993; Novaco & Monahan, 1980; Trickett, Watts & Birman, 1993).

When our team started to work with a Gypsy community in Barcelona, it became obvious after a while that the way the Gypsies were relating among themselves was different from the social majority. What counted for them as 'their people' was not the same as for us, and their collective life was based on principles very different from ours. The bonds and ties they experience between themselves answer a different logic. They are linked by blood and family, and these bonds involve them in complicated relationships of respect, obedience, control and support (for an account where the Gypsies themselves explain their own perspective of their culture, see Cerreruela et al., 2000). The collective dimension predominates, to the extent that they see themselves as members of their group, more than separate individuals. This is different not only from the individualistic way in which we conceive ourselves (Geertz, 1973), but also, from the autonomous feeling we experience in relation to our neighbours. Even though one can be tempted to project on their understanding one's notions of community, the impression our team had was that we were dealing with a different type of self-understanding.

This impression was further reinforced after a similar experience, some time later, when visiting some community projects in Brazil. There, after some conversations with both community psychologists and people from neighbourhoods, it soon became clear that I was facing still another understanding of community. There, 'community', a concept widely used both in Latin and North America, seems to be much more rooted into a geographical understanding: the neighbourhood or "el barrio". There is not enough room here to present and discuss these different understandings. Rather, the aim is to draw attention to this diversity of notions. On comparing my team's insights about how to make sense of the Gypsies' collective, and life in Brazilian 'fa-velas' (shanty towns), and my own experiences as a citizen, it became clear that under the same word, different entities were being conceived – and were not the same entity only with some differences.

This diversity of meanings is also pointed to by the different ways of talking about communities – a question not simply of 'labels', since different words carry with them different understandings. The word community is not used as self-description among the Gypsies; rather, they articulate themselves in terms of 'people' (Crespo, 1998), or even 'associations' among those who participate actively in political life. They only present themselves as "a community" when talking to workers of social services, in a strategic attempt to mimic and adopt their discourses, constructing themselves as a proper interlocutor for community workers. One can put in question, then, whether the way they see and represent themselves can be apprehended by notions which are alien to them.

But their scarce use of the word community is more a similarity than a difference with the social majority, for the word 'community' is also rarely used among the Spanish social majority. For example, our politicians do not use the word 'community' in their speeches, nor do the people when they refer to the social organisation. Rather, we understand ourselves as society, countries, nations, social movements, neighbourhoods. The word 'community' remains for more restricted uses in particular contexts, like 'community of neighbours' (which refers to neighbours associations, not simply to a group of neighbours living close to each other) or 'Christian communities', and even 'ethnic communities'. It is also found in the discourse of social services - in particular of those adopting the perspective of community psychology. Despite this use, though, the notion of community in these discourses refers more to a geographical sector of a town sharing public services, than to a particular feeling or self-definition by people. In any case, the Spaniard use of the concept of 'community' does not seem to be the same as that found in the literature on community psychology from the Americas.

This diversity should not be dismissed as mere diversity in labels, for differences in language could be indicating differences in the realities lived by people. These different uses may well be an expression of the multiplicity inherent to the concept of community, pointing at different ways of relating to and constituting communities. As Joas (1993) says, in the United States communities are seen as entities embedded in (a liberal) society, composing it, but in such a way that the difference between society and community is of 'level'. In European traditions, though, community is seen as a form of organisation different from that of 'society' (not infrequently they are seen as two different phases, following the tradition of Tönnies and Durkheim). Moreover, it is particularly used for marginalised or differentiated collectives, like 'ethnic communities', 'therapy communities', thus being "a marked word" (Fox-Keller, 1985) in relation to "society". The strong link between community and geographical situation ('el barrio') found in Latin America literature is also more ambiguous and diffuse as seen from a European context, since there is not such a strong territorial understanding of the concept.

All the differences in conception are reflected in different ways of conceiving the task of community psychology. In Spain, for instance, and with some exceptions, community psychology is understood mainly in the context of social services provided by the State (Martín, Chacón & Martínez, 1988; Sánchez-Vidal, 1991), and even meetings are organised by social services. So, the interest resides more on how to make social services more reachable and suitable for the whole community, without exclusions, departing from the needs and resources of the community. Therefore, the understanding of the discipline may not be the same as in other countries, like those in Latin America, where the State does not provide such services, and where community psychology is understood as much more of a challenge to the status quo.

Taking into consideration the issue of the local and contextual validity of the notions of 'community' should not be discouraging for community psychology. On the contrary, these reflections make us aware of the variety and multiplicities the discipline encompasses, and help us to acknowledge and be able to work with this complexity. To call every collective articulation a 'community' and not to explore what meanings are being attached to them, maybe does not give us enough insight into how different collective practices are carried out in different contexts. If we want to engage in contextually meaningful practices so as to facilitate social change, one needs to take into account what and how a community is, varies, gains different meanings, or even disappears, depending on the context. In this way, community psychology practices can be rooted in those concepts and entities that are already meaningful in the context where projects are carried out. This avoids further problems, like creating categories and concepts useless for analysis (Vega, 1992); or ignoring the existence of communities - its existence unnoticed - simply because their members hold different beliefs, and carry out actions which we do not identify as belonging to a community (see Scott & Roski, 1999, for this discussion in Asian contexts).

In any case, we should take for granted neither the unity nor the diversity of meanings of community. In the same way in which we are emphasizing the local character of some processes, the globalization contexts means that we can also find translocal processes – without, that is, assuming a cause-effect relationship between globalization and translocal processes. Therefore, what a community is, and how we can make sense of differences and similarities, is an issue that remains empirical and open to negotiation and dialogue with members and non-members of those communities. The existence of both local and translocal processes, and how they interact to constituted communities, is another way of awareness about the partial, dynamic and continuous construction of communities (Bauman, 1999; Beck, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Robertson, 1992).

Changing Identities and Blurred Boundaries

If, according to a representational logic, community is supposed to be an entity which we need to apprehend 'in a substantial way', then we would expect its definition not to leave room for ambiguity, ambivalence or uncertainty. For not only does a definition imply that there must be such defining characteristics, but also, that they may be clearly depicted, in such a way that the community is rendered visible, distinguishable, with no fuzziness. Let's not forget that, according to dictionaries, 'definition' means "a statement of what a thing is, of its nature; a set of characteristics of a thing", but also "putting or being in clear, sharp outline", "to constitute the distinction and difference of", "to set a limit to, to bound". Therefore, one should be able to tell, with no doubt, what

characteristics are stable and proper, and what is not particular or defining of communities. The boundaries of the community should be quite clear. However, as this section will try to show this is not what emerged in our experience in the Gypsy community.

The Gypsy minority is known in several countries for having a strong soci-al identity, resistant to the influences (and not infrequently persecutions) of the broader society. Indeed, part of its self-definition is the awareness of being a minority subject to oppressive power relations. However, when we started our collaboration with the Gypsy association, we found that the Gypsy collective had no unique and clear identity. They were going through a strong period of transition, because recently, due to increasing pressure from social changes, they had to engage in a process of negotiation and redefinition of what it means to be a Gypsy. What surprised us, the team members, was not to find self-definitions changing throughout time, but rather, to realise that there was no way of circumscribing the meaning of the Gypsy community to a fixed set of basic characteristics. There was no simple and single answer to what it is to be a Gypsy and live like a Gypsy, for this was precisely the issue discussed among this group of Gypsies. And these discussions meant internal divisions as well.

Indeed, the community appeared quite fractured – multiple constitutions competing to be the one accepted. One could see divisions between experienced figures of authority and younger influencing figures; between men and women; between those holding different religious beliefs. But even this description is too simple, for it was impossible to draw a line and tell to which side members belonged. The more innovative sector included older and influential figures; some men would work for women's associations in order to be able to stabilise their position; those more in favour of some tendencies could give support to people defending other tendencies in front of a particular problem. Thus, different divisions were coming in and out of focus according to the demands of the particular situation. To try and get rid of this heterogeneity by saying that we are not dealing with one community but with several, only deviates and postpones the problem and it does not help us to come to terms with the inherent multiplicity of the community. Instead, we should try and equip ourselves to deal with situations in which division and rupture can be found.

This diversity and multiplicity within the community questions some of the assumptions of homogeneity and commonality that most definitions share. Indeed, there has been some concern in community social psychology about whether the discipline could be recreating too harmonic and closed an ideal of community. A community which is reminiscent of Tönnies' (1887/1955): An organic collective in harmony with all the members mechanically bound in all aspects of their daily life, homogeneous, united in one voice and with common and shared objectives, where internal conflict and internal power relationships are seen as a threat to

unity and therefore, hardly represented. And the risk is higher in some approaches in the Latin American context, where - given their social-economic circumstances - in their attempts to empower communities giving them voice so they can participate in social transformations, some community psychologists present them as having *one* voice, that is, an only voice. Community turns into a homogeneous entity, univocal, which does not recognise the multiplicity of voices that a community can encompass, as some authors have warned (Sánchez-Vidal, 1991; Sawaia, 1996; Wiesenfeld, 1997).

However, the point is not simply one of acknowledging diversity and difference within community, without ever challenging its limits. As we will see next, the diversity in a community has implications for issues of membership –and this is clearer if we move from an abstract level to a concrete community. For instance, if one tries to define what a Catalan community is, at the same time one is indirectly establishing the characteristics which one should possess in order to claim the condition of 'Catalan'. Just to mention an issue highly controversial nowadays among people and media in Spain, if somebody decides language to be an essential characteristic of a community, this person is directly excluding those who do not speak it. This is precisely one of the reasons why nationalism is so often associated to exclusionary practices: in the very definition of their identities they are establishing the impossibility for others to belong.

Similar things may be said about the dealing with the Gypsy group. In the social imagery, they tend to be represented as the perfect example of a cohesive group (romantic idea which, paradoxically, co-exists with their negative stereotype). For this reason, one would be tempted to assume not only that they have a very strong sense of community, but also, a clear delimitation of who is a member and who is not ('us' Vs. 'them'). But this is not what we found in closer scrutiny of the relationships in the fieldwork. Each of the sides had its own idea of what a Gypsy community was, what the essential characteristics of their collective were, what it means to live 'like a Gypsy'. Put differently, these diverse, contested and competing definitions were drawing a line between those who can be proper members and those who cannot. Thus, each definition was drawing different boundaries, multiple competing limits of the collective, including or excluding different people (Pallí, 2000).

Therefore, contested attempts to establish what 'our community is' imply contested limits which put one another into question. In other words, although community and membership remain two different concepts, they are however strongly related. Notions of community and of membership both constitute each other (Garfinkel, 1967). Thus, the boundaries between members and non-members are not that clear. As ethnomethodology showed when analysing how people construct meaningful realities through everyday practices (Garfinkel, 1967), who is and who is not a member is a continuously contested situation, rather than a stable limit that divides the community into insiders and outsiders. What we find

is "an open-ended, creative dialogue of subcultures, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions" (Clifford, 1988). As Wiesenfeld (1996) suggests, there are still many questions to be answered about how the categorisation 'us'/'they' is negotiated. In a world in which cultural contacts, mobility and exchange from community to community are becoming the rule, and not the exception, the impermeability of boundaries can be challenged (Bhabha, 1994; Clifford, 1988).

One particular case, worth mentioning here, of negotiation of boundaries and identities of the community is the community project itself. Indeed, in the case of the project with members of a Gypsy Association presented above, for example, those in contact with social workers could articulate their identity in terms more akin to institutions. Gypsies from the Association working in the project had a different perspective on their traditions than those who were not used to make them explicit for others. Our interlocutors would use elements of Western culture to elaborate their identities. And, conversely: we were as well increasingly adopting their worldview to think our own identities, undergoing important changes too (Crespo, Pallí & Lalueza, 2000). Therefore, any attempt to understand the constitution of their identities without considering the joint involvement of community members and the group of professionals –what has also been called internal and external members - would have been, if not a failure, at least partial. One needs to take into account the presence of the researchers on the construction of identities and of community meanings (Wiesenfeld, 1996), and consider the particular community process a community is undertaking as constitutive of the community's identities. The particularities of community projects usually imply a transforming process, which constitutes and reconstitutes communities in particular and unforeseen ways.

Community as Relationships

The image of community emerging after these considerations is difficult to approach theoretically – let alone by definitions - in abstract terms, without taking into account the peculiarities of each case, and in particular, without taking into account the experiences of the community members. Joint reflections by internal and external agents on the notion of community may help us understand in what way community members comprehend their way of living and organising, and how they conceive themselves. One example of this proposal is the illuminating study by García y Giuliani (1992), in which they present both internal and external agents discussing the different characteristics of a community, while the authors illustrate some of the discussions with the comments of members of the community. This study, then, represents an effort to introduce the members' point of view in the very definition of community, increasing their participation, as a strategic facilitation for empowerment and change.

But what this study brings to the fore, too, is that, through engagement and participation, collective reflections on community can become a tool for the

construction of a collective identity rather than attempts to obtain an abstract and de-contextualized definition. Reflections about their collective identity may increase the awareness of one's identity, of one's situation, and in the case of marginalized communities, of the inequalities they suffer. All of which may bring them to participation in common projects, to improve their own situation. In this way, to open definitions of community to the reflection of community members may turn them into subjects, and not simply objects, of social change and their own conditions of life (Montero, 1984; Shotter, 1993).

Let's illustrate the point with an example. Suppose the case of immigrants in Spain, a heterogeneous group of people from different countries with different cultures and visions of the world, but sharing certain problems that lead them to join together. Maybe they were part of a community in their own countries, but it is not so clear whether they are a community now. This circumstance, however, does not prevent community psychologists to try and engage in a common project, working with them as a group to improve their situation and rights. What is more, probably as a result of collective action, an awareness of their situation can give rise to notions of them being a group with particular needs, rights and demands. In all these cases we can work to get self-organization and implication, and community psychology has a lot to say. When including the members' reflections, thoughts about community may become a way to think of them, to gain awareness of their conditions, to fight for an improvement of their situation.

These concerns make very apparent that the identity of a community is not something to be apprehended through definitions, but a tool for social change, which, in order to be useful for survival and social fight, needs to be able to undergo metamorphoses (Ciampa, 1987). Indeed, communities and groups in contexts of domination negotiate strategically their critical elements of identity (language, land, leadership, religion, etc.), all of which are, in specific conditions, replaceable. This involves acknowledgement of the fact that communities can use, as resources, new elements, new discourses, new strategies, without being seen as betraying their traditions – they even may, in certain circumstances, recreate their own history.

Again, this challenges the idea that there is a core of essential characteristics, and draws our attention to the analysis of how these metamorphoses happen. Examples of this are provided by contested identities in social movements. Movements like feminism, black power, and disabled people share a malleable identity, which has allowed them to represent themselves under a different light in different situations. In the case of the Gypsies, for instance, whose origin as a group has always been surrounded by a certain mystery, this uncertainty can be put to their use. Nowadays some of their leaders are constructing more public narratives of their origins in order to legitimise their existence as a group with proper rights, deserving respect, self-government, and therefore, certain autonomy

from social majority's governments. To ask whether those narratives are historical or mythical, or whether the Gypsies possess true historic legitimacy or not, tracing back their traditions until finding a supposed origin, is to miss the point. It may be a fiction, but it is a political one with empowering effects – like demanding political representation.

Once we analyse the constitution, questioning and reconstitution in identity and self-conception a community goes through, these collectives can be presented as an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished (Clifford, 1988). As both, historical, and also more contingent viz. local constructions, which articulate and re-articulate themselves in particular situations and conditions. Whereas this type of concerns have been very present to those working with self-help groups, or with problem-oriented groups, it could also be suggestive and intellectually productive to consider more stable and permanent groups of people under this more unstable and precarious light. Communities and groups often change in the strategic, political sense mentioned above, always depending on the relationships established with other communities and collectives.

Therefore, we should see communities as relational and political, coming and going in response to change and surrounding ideological climate (Clifford, 1988). That is, as any social entity, communities are immersed in a continual process of becoming (Ibáñez, 1997), a moment in the fight amongst social agents (Bourdieu, 1982). If we do not take into account the constructed and always-in-construction character of the community, we would be obliterating its dialectical nature, that is, both its relational and its process character, consequently risking reifications (Wiesenfeld, 1996).

This points out the limitations of the metaphor of 'the community as a container' (the community containing relationships, containing history, containing leadership, etc). Paraphrasing Guareschi (1996), it is not that in the community we can find special relationships different from those outside the community - as if it were a container with clear-cut limits, for even the limits, as we have seen, are in continuous constitution. The community itself *is* relationships, an on-going achievement, a complex result of some particular relationships –involving both members and non-members -, but aspiring to a true dialogue, always crossed by power relationships. In other words, a community can be considered a negotiated and locally situated practice (Haraway, 1991; Montenegro, 1998). A collective which is part of and constructed in the complexity of social practices, cultural specificities, political battles, trying to make its voice heard by other communities. This is why we should stress that to show the constructed nature of the concept of community, while stressing the participatory relationships in social struggle, is not aimed at a trivialisation or a depoliticization of the concept. Contrariwise, it aims to make present the constitutive political dimension of the community. And

it seems important to emphasise this point in a time in which community approaches are sometimes presented simply as a procedure for the management of community resources.

Conclusion

The multiplicity of definitions of community available in the literature would be problematic and disorienting if we approached the community from a representational perspective. That is, as a univocal entity which we need to know with certainty. But if we consider definitions as reflexive moves within the discipline, this variety makes us aware of the multiplicity and diversity of such a concept, and how it needs to be considered as locally and contextually constructed. All this emphasizes the complex and blurred character of the concept of community. Thus, it prepares us to face the diversity, uncertainty and changing character of the meanings that can be attached to collective life.

This paper does not present theorization around the community as a fruitless endeavor. On the contrary, I think it is of the utmost importance to support those who emphasize the need for theorization, integration and reflection (f.i., Altman, 1987; Chinsky, 1977; Montero, 1996; Newbrough, 1992; Rappaport, 1977, 1987; Wiesenfeld, 1998). Both, a theorising expressing "the field's worldview" (Rappaport, 1987) and a theorising which draws from more interdisciplinary sources. But we need theoretical accounts allowing community psychology to face the challenges of our complex, post-modern times (Newbrough, 1995), when increasingly we will have to learn to engage in action in contexts of unawareness and uncertainty, constitutive of contemporary social life (Beck, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c).

Probably, making the conceptualization of community more attentive to dialogical situations (Sampson, 1993) between members and non-members, in concrete circumstances; and trying to understand how meaning is constructed in everyday situations and practices (Garfinkel, 1967; Ibáñez, 1994), we could enrich our understanding of the community. That enrichment would derive of the community's own constitution, together with characteristics such as: diversity, multiplicity, uncertainty and the interplay between fixed and blurred limits that are (re)constituted in everyday practices. We even could re-conceptualize the role of the individual as non-antagonistic to community values (Newbrough, 1995; Sawaia, 1996; Wiesenfeld, 1996). Perhaps moving the concept towards partiality, heterogeneity and multivocality (Clifford, 1988) would help us to have a concept of community more open to the contradictions and conflicts that characterize everyday life in post-modern times (Newbrough, 1992, 1995). Moreover, the introduction of complexity and uncertainty could connect community psychology with some other theoretical contributions, which think communities - as partial communities (Haraway, 1991) or risk communities (Beck, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c)

322 - in a different way. To make the concept of community complex, with space for uncertainty and blurred limits is aimed to reinforce the constitutive political dimension of the community. Because the community at least allows a context in which people struggle to participate actively in the definition of their situation, in the construction of their past, present and future, in the construction of their real utopia.

To allow more discontinuity and uncertainty into community projects could help us make sense of the precariousness of some of our experiences in particular contexts, where sometimes community work has to be carried out with the uncertainty of what counts as 'the community'. Things get even more complicated with the instabilities of contemporary life. The background of uncertainty, complexity and partial and changing identities in which we live is so pervasive, that an idea of 'community' as a locally placed, defined, quite integrated collective with shared objectives does not permit us to fully understand experiences and practices. At least in a Spaniard context, to construct a notion of community with limits more blurred, allowing inconsistent and intermittent feelings of belonging, with more ambiguity as to who belongs to it, less linked to notions of territoriality, could help us to approach community pratices in a more meaningful way.

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