The Concept of "We": A Community Social Psychology Myth?

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This paper questions the conceptions of community found in the literature on com-
munity psychology, as well as those employed in everyday life, which reflect the
notion of community as a "we". This notion is understood as a compact and homoge-
nous group, assuming that their members feel, think, and behave in similar and
predictable ways, as corresponds to their belonging to the community. It implies a set
of processes such as membership, inclusion, identity, feeling of belonging, and an
emotional bond or sense of community which do not seem to vary across time and
within members of the community. Thus, this meaning of "we" appeals to an ideal-
ized vision of the community, and as we shall argue in this paper, it is rather a
dialectic and dynamic process, in which shared needs and group processes built
across time afford intragroup diversity, disagreements, and fluctuations in dimensions
such as participation in collective actions, among others.

Introduction

Though community social psychology is among the youngest fields in the discipline of
psychology, it has contributed broadly to psychological theory, research, and practice. A
defining characteristic of the field's contributions—especially in Latin America—is its atten-
tion to aspects of context. This focus has fostered recognition of the salience of contextual
features to the generalizability of findings across similar and dissimilar environments.

One topic that has elicited the greatest interest in community social psychology is the
very concept of *Community*, a fundamental context for human activity and the locus within
which the discipline's basic processes operate. In spite of the variety of definitions of
community, the breadth of meanings given the term in different countries, as well as the
diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches to its measurement, a common ele-
ment can be found across these variations, i.e., the implicit notion of community as a *we*. In
this sense, community refers to a homogeneous group of individuals, clearly distinguishable
from *others*. Within any such group, there would seem to be no place for acknowledging
variation or diversity. The aim of this paper is to debate the homogeneous quality of commu-
nity. To do so, we will analyze conceptualizations of community current in community social
psychology and contrast them with concepts arising within community practice and with the
paradigmatic characteristics which guide that practice, especially in Latin America.

The Concept of Community in Community Social Psychology

In community psychology (or community social psychology as it is commonly called in
Latin America), we find definitions of the concept of community that differ (among other
aspects) in terms of the purposes they attribute to the field, their theoretical grounding, the
context within which they have been generated, and methodological strategies for their

measurement. This paper will not discuss each of these differences in depth. Rather, the paper focuses on the common thread among the various approaches, i.e., the concept of *we* as a totality of people who are clearly set apart from *them* who are conceived as a *not us*. A community, from this perspective, is viewed as a homogeneous group in which no internal discrepancies and no intra- and inter-individual differences are recognized.

The paper's goal is to challenge that view of community. The challenge reflects my concern that the unquestioned adoption of that perspective may lead to the pursuit of homogeneity and overvaluing of regularity, equilibrium, and congruence typical of positivist theories in social psychology. This perspective seems to be more interested in preserving the status quo than in providing a stimulus to change at the community level. From the very beginning, *Community Social Psychology* has stressed the active role of individuals as contributors to their own transformation processes. Since that perspective champions diversity both within and among social groups, the bias in concepts of community toward homogeneity turns out to be rather paradoxical.

In fact, the origins and development of community social psychology are very closely linked to alternative ways of obtaining knowledge and generating change at the individual, social, and environmental levels. These links are reflected in definitions of community psychology or community social psychology offered by Rappaport (1977) and Chavis and Newbrough (1986) in the United States, and Montero (1984) in Venezuela. These definitions make explicit reference to the need for change among individuals and/or their surroundings, in order to improve their personal, social, environmental, and other conditions. Each of these definitions reflects the assumption that a community exists and serves as the context within which individual change becomes possible.

One of the reasons for the appearance of the community psychology movement in the United States was the need felt by some psychologists to counter the perceived social disintegration that followed the Second World War. This disintegration expressed itself in individual feelings of anonymity, alienation, anomie, self-interest, maladjustment, and loss of a sense of community. The early community psychologists hoped that, as mental health professionals, they could contribute to the following generation of desired social changes. In their view, the community represented the setting or environment within which this goal could be accomplished.

In Latin America, community social psychology has emphasized the problematization of situations which have traditionally been perceived as natural. The field has also worked to raise consciousness and to foster political dissent toward those in power. These emphases were viewed as stimulating critical thinking as well as the design and implementation of interventions to bring about change in the groups with which the work is performed. In current definitions of community, it appears that the change in emphasis toward homogeneity ignores the antagonistic forces operating within communities. In fact, these forces arise from the differences among the individuals who comprise them. This contemporary view of community is thus simplistic and does not reflect the complexity and dynamic of actual community processes. It is not the intent of this paper to review or culturally analyze existing definitions of community processes. Rather, based on our experience in working with communities and our understanding of selected definitions of community, we intend to offer a set of critical thoughts about a way of conceiving community and approaching community projects.

Definitions of community make general reference to a community's component elements (individuals and the physical contexts which define their activities, i.e., residential, work, recreational, political, and religious settings) and to the processes (psychological, social, cultural) that occur among those components (Kelly, 1971; Rappaport, 1980; Ander-Egg, 1982; Chavis & Newbrough, 1986; Sánchez Wiesenfeld, 1983; Sánchez, Wiesenfeld & Cronick,

1991; Sánchez Vidal, 1991; Montero, 1994a). Regardless of the context and motives, interests and needs which lead people to come together, organize, and establish socioemotional ties that make them feel (at least in terms of the dimension which unites them) as part of a single whole, there is a *common denominator* among the definitions of community.

Each definition stresses *similarity* among the members of a community as a necessary condition for the group identity to develop. At the same time, these definitions ignore the unique characteristics of each individual and the potential subcultural and intragroup differences which are present in every group. Such differences are the result of the dynamic nature of the relations and processes its members construct over time. The tendency toward homogeneity enhances similarities and conceals differences. In my view, this process is inimical to the spirit of change and preservation of diversity that the pioneers of the community psychology movement sought to preserve. This coexistence between the pursuit of change, on the one hand, and the maintenance of equilibrium, on the other, would seem contradictory. This contradiction is reflected in the field's epistemological approach to community processes, its ontological conceptions of community, and its methodological orientation toward community practice.

What follows is a review of arguments for reconceptualizing definitions of community based on those elements which stress the unique characteristics of the individuals and subgroups within the community. Such characteristics may divide a community temporarily or permanently drive some members out of the community. Whether acknowledged or not, however, these characteristics never cease being part of community life. For that reason, they cannot be ignored, evaded, denied, or concealed—no matter how much they may lead us away from the myth of the *we*.

Toward a Reinterpretation of Community

The Community As a Social Construction

We infer from the argument thus far, that a community is an entity which is constructed. It cannot, as some sociologists suggest, be viewed as having an existence prior to its members' actions. Rather, it is the individual characteristics of a group of people who share a set of common features—the specific environment in which they live, work, enjoy themselves, help each other, and the needs they face—which give rise to the conditions that contribute to building a community.

It should be noted that uncovering the steps through which this construction occurred, in the context of our analysis, follows from the participation of professionals whose objectives, involvement, and relationship with the members of a given community varied over time. Hence, the meaning of a community should be understood as representing a "co-construction," in which the professional's presence influences the sense of community experienced by its members.

How Is a Community Built? From the "I" to the "We"

It is important to recognize that a community springs from the personal identities of its members. Since the process of creating a community, as a social construct, proceeds from one's personal identity, the individual then naturally incorporates the community identity into his own. Thus, the construction of a community brings about personal, group, and environmental transformations. Community is built upon individuals' needs, social relationships with their emotional concomitants, networking or the exchange of material resources, psychological issues (e.g., affection, empowerment, consciousness-raising, a sense of identity or of belonging to a community), as well as social issues (e.g., participation, solidarity, commitment). Rules also develop within the community, which are not necessarily explicit, but which emerge from community interaction and symbolic exchanges. These elements have been referred to by Garcia, Giuliani, and Wiesenfeld (1994) as the functional components of

community. Although some attention has been given to identifying the components of community, much less information is available on the processes necessary for its construction.

The next section examines the potential for creating meaning, developing emotional ties, and taking action within a community through the critical recovery of the histories of communities, and the analysis and interpretation of the lessons derived from such histories.

Beyond the "We": Community As an Intersubjective Reality

In the psychological literature, references to community allude to it as an overarching concept that transcends the *we* and that becomes an entity which extends beyond its members' existence. This view coincides with the concept of reality offered by Fernández Christlieb (1994) in relation to what he referred to as "collective psychology." His concept of reality can be extrapolated to the sense of community in community psychology. Fernández Christlieb notes that:

> . . . collective psychology . . . sees the world as a complete psychic entity capable of having will and affect, within which people, ideas, objects, and emotions move; that is, the object on which collective psychology focuses is a subject endowed with reason, so this form of psychology cannot explain, predict or control, but seeks only to interpret and understand, to engage in a dialogue with psycho-collective reality (p. 23).

This way of conceiving "sense of community" allows us to infer that the meaning attributed to discussions among people in the community context will vary depending on when, in history, one seeks to understand it. The composition of the *we* must be understood within the same historic relativism.

Without denying this view of sense of community, we need to be on guard against a potential *reification of the community* as an entity independent of its components, i.e., as an impersonal object. Erasing the boundaries between subject and object (in the case of community psychology, this would correspond to ignoring the boundaries between the researcher and the community) reflects the monistic nature of reality as it is conceived in constructionism. As noted in the initial statement about the purpose of this paper, I feel this approach should be elaborated upon or debated. This perspective of community comes from scholars who are unknown to most community psychologists. Thus, the shared meaning which emerges between them and the groups with which they relate should not be confused with the intersubjectivity that develops within the groups themselves. Understanding access to the latter remains a subject about which much has yet to be learned. In this respect, we may well ask: Is such access possible, or does it imply an alteration of the natural course of events, as would occur *without* the presence of others? In this case, the "others" would be the researchers.

Identity With a Community: One of Multiple Collective Identities

To the complexity of community life must be added a crucial aspect of how people get involved in their community. It should be appreciated that in addition to the demands, actions, and negotiations required for community participation, a community's members must simultaneously deal with the ongoing processes involved with being a member of a family, a student, an employer, a friend, etc. (Triandis, 1994). Thus, the "I" of that collectivism referred to as a community is made up of many distinct identities that are interdependent by nature. Acknowledging that everyone possesses multiple identities allows one to recognize that belonging to a community is but one of an individual's many roles and that events occur in each of these roles, which affect one's emotional and physical condition, social relations, etc. Such events are what lead a person temporarily to set himself apart from the other members of the community. For a part of the time, the person becomes a student, a

father or mother, a professional, a child, or a worker. These shifts in identity occur in addition to being a member of the community.

Redemption of Diversity

Belonging to and feeling oneself a part of a community should not conflict with other aspects of one's life. Variations among people in the degree and form of involvement, activity, participation, and commitment to the community should be expected. The *community concept of community* needs to protect and value as positive the differences among its members. Such differences supply the community with a wide range of skills and resources, while also providing the potential for difficulties and problems. Both of these elements are part of community life and experience.

Such differences among members of a community are especially striking in Latin America, where the word *we* does not always refer to the same people, and where ignoring the *I* (the particular burden borne by each individual in his struggle for survival) represents an important omission. Thus, the differentiation of who belongs when, and the enhancement of individual, as well as collective needs, should be considered. In fact, the *we* needs to be understood in its context as an ever-changing network marked by continuous inclusions and exclusions. Thus, living in a community involves multiple encounters and separations. It also includes an unconditional sense of belonging to some group. This belonging provides a basis for determining one's differentiation from those who do not belong. It also provides an identification with a given location as well as with the people who share, feel, and think about the group.

As gleaned from the definitions of community, community psychology, or community social psychology, a set of explicit and implicit conditions exists as part of membership. These conditions may subject the individual members of a community to a high level of demands. This occurs when membership includes the requirement or expectation that involvements disruptive to harmony, good relations, or optimal participation are seen as detrimental to the community, perhaps even viewed as threats to the community's existence. Though such a confrontation generally comes from sources outside of the community (Rappaport, 1984; Montero, 1994b), it is also true that the threat can arise from within the community itself.

In fact, Sarason (1974) tacitly acknowledges this possibility when he says that though there may be a conflict between the needs of the individual and those of the larger group, it should be resolved in such a way as not to destroy the psychological sense of community. In this sense, Sarason's assertion reinforces the idea of the community as a whole, to which isolated individuals may be opposed. It does not, however, consider the possibility that the opposition could stem from a subcommunity within the larger community, i.e., from a number of individuals within a community organized in opposition to the majority because they do not share certain ideas or experiences. This means that people with divergent views may coexist in the same community with others with whom they share needs, feelings, actions, hopes, space, dispositions, commitments, and a history which makes them feel part of a single whole.

It is that feeling of *identification*, which makes the community much more than the sum of its parts (García, Giuliani, & Wiesenfeld, 1994). The community is a totality which is joined by common features and by the individual aspects of its members. As we shall explain below, this is what we have called a "macrobelonging" and "multiple microbelongings."

Macrobelonging and Microbelongings

In the process of constructing the *we*, a dimension is created that we call *macrobelonging,* which is not disturbed by the vicissitudes of everyday life. In spite of the divisions within the larger community—beyond the polarizations and discrepancies which arise within it— there is a sense of community that integrates minorities to that portion of the community

which *all* those who have been through a process identify with and defend. This process has given rise to what Schutz and Luckman (1973) called "tacit knowledge," wherein the members share a meaning attributed to the world because they share the experience of events occurring in a common space and time. This *macrobelonging* can coexist with *microbelongings,* which have to do with the multiple collective identities discussed above and which call for the redemption of diversity and privacy.

Society, Community, and Subcommunity

What is envisioned, then, is not only the possibility of bilateral influence between the larger society and the community, but also a third form of influence, in which the former two are joined by the influence exerted by and on, a subcommunity or dissident sector within the community. Community psychology has yet to study that aspect of a community's daily life. In this respect, we may well ask where the transforming dissidence to which Montero (1994a) refers really lies. Does it occur in the satisfaction of felt needs that may lead to the situation which one hopes to avoid, i.e., to habituation or a state of passive acceptance? Is it instead, reflected in submission to authority at whatever level (society, community)? Does not the subordination of a subcommunity (or active minority, in the terms used by Moscovici (1991)) to the community amount to a form of domination that reproduces other forms of oppression imposed by the majority on the minority?

The fear or rejection of dissidence is rather paradoxical, especially by the members of a field whose raison d'être is precisely the promotion of social change. Respect for diversity is assumed in one's commitment to community social psychology (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1993) and the existence of a community symbolizes, among other things, the overcoming of fear about such diversity.

We may then ask: Is change possible under conditions which reject chaos, uncertainty, dissidence, complexity, or divergence for the status quo (Prigogine & Stengers, 1990)? Is not this discourse on community really constructing realities inconsistent with those to which it aspires? Is it not sacrificing creativity for the sake of conformity? Complexity for the sake of reductionism? There would appear to be two perspectives on the issue—the "what should be" diversity and the "what is" diversity. On the one hand, diversity appears as a theoretical goal in community work, as pointed out by Kelly (1966) when he stated that sensitivity and tolerance for diversity is the core requirement for the health professional in a community setting (p. 536). At the same time, the practice of community psychology sometimes appears to turn its back on that approach.

This paradox is only heightened by the fact that the field has focused much of its work on communities which historically have not been able to express themselves in society's political-economic-power spheres. The members of such communities are therefore viewed as minorities who need to be redeemed (Ibáñez, 1994b; Lincoln, 1994). How then can the redemption of minorities vis-a-vis the majority be reconciled with the fact that, just as there is diversity within the majority, diversity is also present within the minorities and consensus or equilibrium is not necessarily the basis for growth, transformation, empowering, and consciousness-raising? The aim of this aspect of community psychology should be to acknowledge differences and polarities and put them to good use within the community. The alternative is to ignore them and thereby recreate the pattern in which the holders of power have always ignored the voices of the powerless.

Researchers and The Community: From Dualism to Intersubjectivity

We feel that it is important to define the community psychologist's role in the concept of the *we* in community, especially if it is agreed that this is important for the community. The

community psychologist is the *other* who comes or is brought in but does not belong to the group in the same way that the members of the community feel, identify with, and belong to, that community. This dualism between subject and object is acknowledged by Fernández Christlieb (1994):

> Certainly things mean nothing if there is no one to ask what they are called. What is in fact happening in this epistemology is that the subject, the knower, gives the object knowledge . . . and then allows the object to use those resources to develop its own knowledge in its own terms . . . subject and object comprise a single reality (p. 25).

Investigators such as Gergen and Gergen (1991) assert that this unity is achieved from the elaboration of perceptions and conclusions about shared events. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is a dual learning process because events are interpreted and that process of interpretation gives rise to comparisons and contrasts with divergent constructions, until a synthesis is achieved.

We might suppose that some radical constructionists would not agree with our formulation of communities. Rather they may categorize them as examples of "half-way constructionism" (Ibáñez, 1994a), in which a subject initially appears differentiated from the object but later (as in the case of community social psychology once the researcher and the community become familiar with each other) that dichotomy disappears and a synthesis or transformation leading to unity occurs. The issue is not to debate how inconsistent with constructionism a position such as Fernández Christlieb's (1994) is, since it starts from a duality typical of the positivist paradigm itself. Rather, the point is that as we, as researchers, work with and come into close contact with communities, we must recognize that regardless of their level of organization, critical thought, consciousness, or empowerment, they have a history that precedes our involvement. This history forces us to acknowledge a distance between us and that community which we would like somehow to reduce but which we must acknowledge cannot and should not be eliminated. What we are acknowledging is that we are not *them,* and by the same token, *we* belong to another *we* and though we make affective contact with *them* we continue being *us,* the researchers, and *they* continue being the community. As Fernández Christlieb (1994) points out:

> Subject and object establish a degree of mutual intelligibility which allows them to internalize the other's and empathize with each other, and establish a dialogue in which each one expresses his needs, expectations, proposals, and qualities (p. 26).

This presents us with a problem of epistemological inconsistency. Although we theoretically support one conception of reality, in action we appear not to be concerned with it. The implication, in other words, is that we endorse one position but reach it from another; i.e., we attempt to achieve unity from an initial duality. But is it possible to attain such unity? Is it feasible to start from duality and end up in unity? Can we define the ontology of an object with an epistemology incompatible with it? Or will it be necessary to redefine our epistemological categories?

The Community As An Object and Agent of Critical Thought and Transformation

All other things being equal prior to the construction of the community, the members of the community identify themselves as individuals rather than as part of a collective body. For them to become a *we,* they have had to be and have not ceased being I's, you's, and he or she's. Moreover, people who are fully identified with their communities and are highly

participatory in them often assert the need for a certain personal and family privacy. There are simply times when individuals need to erect boundaries and create their own space. This leads us to recognize the coexistence of the *I/we* duality.

Still another point we wish to discuss in relation to the concept of community from its members' standpoint is that thinking critically about the community itself—a kind of duplication—implies a process which can be fostered by external researchers, as part of the activities inherent in the action-research participant methodology applied in community work. In this respect, the community researches itself and becomes a subject that thinks critically about itself, together with the professional who accompanies it or facilitates the process.

The Community's Definition of Itself

Strikingly, the definitions of community offered by its members tend to reflect the same aspects as those stressed in the community literature, which transmits a view of cohesion in regard to the *we* (García, Giuliani, & Wiesenfeld, 1994). This would imply that community members have internalized the social desirability of the *we* as everyone. This view, however, reflects the construction of an idealized sense of community which does not necessarily coincide with the day-to-day experience of those community members. Experiences in poor neighborhoods of Caracas, for example, provide evidence of a view of community which reproduces the ideas of totality, equilibrium, and order found in the discipline's definitions of community (Garcia & Giuliani, 1992). This coincidence may represent, in part, the community's idealization of itself, and, in part a way of reducing differences between the community and the larger society which dominates it. The interpenetration between subject and object of which Fernández Christlieb (1994) speaks has reached such intensity between community social psychologists and community members that the answers to the questions: "What is a community, your community, to you?" do not reflect the spontaneous responses expected from common sense. Rather, the answers may reflect the results of joint analysis of the process being carried out. In this way, each party appropriates, in the positive sense of the term, the other's knowledge. In effect, community members may be reporting what they think the community social psychologist wants to hear.

If we agree that consciousness raising is the process which fosters critical analysis of the "real" conditions of the community's life and world, rather than ideas imposed by external sources, one might assert that it should be otherwise. But the community's "should be" is imposed on it from the outside rather than its "is" which comes from within the complexity of "its reality." This point needs to be better understood, given both its theoretical implications and its implications for research, practice, and facilitation of community processes. The aim of this emphasis is to reintroduce into the discussion the diversity which really characterizes a community and which, in some cases, has been suppressed.

A New Order For The Community Complexity

No matter how obvious, it is valuable to emphasize that the process whereby a group or congregation of individuals is transformed into a community is complex and marked by difficulties stemming from a variety of sources, including the community's own members. It should be understood as a dynamic and complex project. This does not imply that chaos, that state of complexity farthest removed from equilibrium (Prigogine & Stengers, 1990), is the ideal condition for the development of communities. But neither can we ignore that chaos is a component of life, and hence, of the life of a community. The idea is to recognize that chaos exists and must be incorporated as an element in the definition of community, and that

in spite of (or thanks to!) it, there is a sense of community and a group of people willing to struggle to preserve that sense.

Underestimation or Idealization: Two Kinds of Dangerous Relations

We should not fail to mention that the incorporation of communities (understood not in the mythic sense of a reified and homogeneous *we,* but in terms of the participation of its members and of that of their subcommunities) in the debate, regarding their nature as homogeneous or diverse, is a necessary condition for that debate to be meaningful. Failure to do so runs the risk of constructing knowledge of a community based on what Fernández Christlieb (1994) has called an:

> . . . epistemology of distance; i.e., a way of relating to an object which assumes that power lies with the subject (the researcher is this case), who acts without consultation, . . . , operating on the world without asking its opinion (p. 23).

Alternatively, we risk submerging ourselves in an activism in which we cease to be ourselves and come to be "community" (epistemology of fusion according to Fernández Christlieb). Such an approach yields unquestionable benefits for the researcher and the community. On the other hand, it may be seen as academically trivial. That is a serious limitation since it prevents the fruitful debate that occurs in an exchange between colleagues.

Conclusions

Our aim in this paper has been to share a set of concerns about the concept of "community" as it is conceptualized in community psychology and community social psychology. We have tried to contrast that concept with the experience of community which arises through work with communities and through the critical analyses of relevant literature on community. In our review of the literature, we found the definition of community to be a set of individuals who have built an identity from shared experiences and processes which homogenize them in regard to characteristics, actions, and perspectives. From this perspective, a community identity is constructed in which differences are simplified and points of convergence are highlighted.

This conception is somewhat inconsistent with discipline that has valued diversity rather than unity or homogeneity. In fact, the attempt to incorporate sectors of the population into community projects normally excluded from the groups with whom psychological knowledge has traditionally been built is a call for incorporation of those segments of the population which should not be ignored because they lack power. In this respect, it is noteworthy that this component of every human group does not appear in the definitions of community, especially when the aim is to de-emphasize differences.

We assume that community is a controversial topic, as both an object and subject which researches and builds itself. Community is dynamic, historically determined, and complex. It is, therefore, contradictory to adopt definitions that ignore these processes and the different situations and stages through which communities and their members pass. We should avoid definitions that do not acknowledge the dialectic which arises among the individual, subcommunity, community, and societal levels, or definitions that ignore the researcher's own transformations over the course of the community's stages and processes, and his relations with the individuals involved in those processes. Based on these considerations, we therefore propose to return diversity to community theory and practice, as it relates to both the community itself and its processes.

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