Critical thinking on theory and practice of Community Psychology

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The Syntax of Present Day Society and the Building of Community Life.

Abstract

Communitarian life is the human condition. In it human beings find mutuality, affection and identity – three of the fundamental resources they require to fulfill their existence. Because of the span of resources communitarian life brings about it has not only proved along human history to be a condition that grants better quality of life but has also rooted the strategy of manufacturing cells (the main tool enterprises manage to face the fierce economic competition in the beginning of the XXI century). The structure of manufacturing cells is a technique which replaces the logic of the assembly lines by the logic of the communitarian life. Notwithstanding this revival of community by the enterprises, the present day society has not spread the community model as its pattern of existence. Conversely, that kind of use of the community model was neutralized by several factors, being one of them the steady production and innovation of all sorts of gadgets, which can and have been used to solve people's problems and satisfy their needs, thus an stimulus for an individualistic culture. The dependence of those gadgets has created a culture in which communitarian life is not required because people learn to depend on gadgets rather than on other people. Apparently, people do not need the community any more because being able to live alone, the other turns to be less important than the gadgets. That culture has been characterized by traits which being the social pattern of human life imposes hurdles to the development of the communitarian life. The first of these traits is the value given to and the dependence of sensations. This cultural trait has been an obstacle to community which is strongly dependent of affection. It is hard to think of a community grounded on sensations because the latter has to do with individuality. The second cultural trait is the loss of sensitiveness for the causality of things. The gradual but steady loss of confidence in the economic and political systems fuels the disappointment with the real word, a condition which according to Desbarats (2009) fuels in its turn "the bulimia" of work and of causality. Surrounded by technologies people have the perception of power and therefore become result directed rather than building of textures of causalities directed. Community implies the sharing of work on the causes of both the events and targets. The third cultural trait is the cult of the urgency, a kind of recreation of the

non-temporal time. The conditions created by the economic competition within the context produced by technologies which shrink the time and the space impose the dependence of the flow of conjunctures. These conditions are easily seen in the "zappings", "fast", "spots", "clips" and "just-in-time" patterns of social and individual behavior. The "24 hours" services confirm the non temporal time. Today to be busy all the time gives meaning to the existence. How is it possible to build communitarian life when the prevailing cultural logic is the one of the flow of the conjunctures? The individual profile fueled by that culture discloses a person flexible, always rushing, with short term focus, reactive, authoritative, intolerant to frustration and to failure, unable to delegate and unmotivated to communitarian life. As such, that individual may be master of his/her time but is turned into slave of his/her desires. These conditions nourish the social sedentarization and the individualization. Through the communitarian life people can learn that the mobile phone is a powerful weapon in the war to fight the economic competition as they can also learn that it is fragile as an instrument of emancipation. In the war people face with their own conscience the most powerful weapon is reflexivity and affection, two resources they can find easily in the communitarian life, not in the gadgets.

La Sintaxis de la sociedad actual y la construcción de vida comunitaria.

Resumen

La vida comunitaria es la condición humana. En ella los seres humanos encuentran mutualidad, afecto e identidad – tres de los recursos fundamentales que requieren para realizar su existencia. A causa del rango de recursos que aporta la vida comunitaria ésta no sólo ha probado, a lo largo de la historia humana que es una condición que ofrece mejor calidad de vida, sino también ha inspirado la estrategia de células de producción (la principal arma que las empresas gestionan para enfrentar la feroz competencia económica a principios del siglo XXI). La estructura de las células de producción es la técnica que remplaza la lógica de las líneas de ensamblaje por la lógica de la vida comunitaria. No obstante la revitalización de la comunidad por las empresas, la actual sociedad no ha difundido el modelo de comunidad como su patrón de existencia. Conversamente, ese tipo de uso del modelo de comunidad ha sido neutralizado por varios factores, uno de los cuales ha sido la producción e innovación constante de todo tipo de aparatos (gadgets) que pueden y han sido usados para resolver los problemas de las gentes y satisfacer sus necesidades, volviéndose por lo mismo en el estímulo para una cultura individualística. La dependencia de estos aparatos ha creado una cultura en la cual la vida comunitaria no se requiere porque la gente ha aprendido a depender de los aparatos más que de la gente. Aparentemente, la gente ya no necesita de la comunidad porque es capaz de vivir sola. El otro resulta ser menos importante que los aparatos. Esta cultura se ha caracterizado por rasgos que siendo el modelo social de la vida humana impone obstáculos al desarrollo de la vida comunitaria. El primero de estos rasgos es la dependencia y el valor otorgado a las sensaciones. Este rasgo cultural ha sido un obstáculo a la comunidad que depende fuertemente del afecto. Es difícil pensar en una comunidad basada en las sensaciones porque éstas tienen que ver con la individualidad. El segundo rasgo cultural es la pérdida de sensibilidad en relación a la casualidad de las cosas. La gradual pero constante pérdida de confianza en los sistemas económicos y políticos impulsa el desencanto con el mundo real, una situación que según Desbarats (2009) impulsa a su vez "la bulimia" por el trabajo y por la causalidad. Rodeada por tecnologías la gente tiene una percepción de poder y por lo mismo llega a ser "orientada a resultados" más que a construir tejidos "orientados a causalidades". Comunidad implica el compartir trabajo en las causas de ambos, de

los acontecimientos y de los objetivos. El tercer rasgo cultural es el culto de la urgencia, una especie de recreación del tiempo no temporal. Las condiciones creadas por la competencia económica dentro del contexto producido por las tecnologías, que encojen el tiempo y el espacio, imponen la dependencia del flujo de coyunturas. Estas condiciones pueden verse fácilmente en el "zapping", "fast", "spots", "clips" y "just-in-time", patrones o esquemas de comportamiento individual y social. Los servicios de "24 horas" confirman el tiempo no temporal. Estar hoy ocupado todo el tiempo da sentido a la existencia. ¿Cómo es posible construir vida comunitaria cuando la lógica cultural prevalente es la del flujo de coyunturas? El perfil individual impulsado por esa cultura es el de una persona flexible, siempre apresurada, incapaz de delegar y sin motivación para la vida comunitaria. Como tal, este individuo puede ser dueño de su tiempo pero se vuelve un esclavo de sus deseos. Estas condiciones alimentan la sedentarización social y la individualización. A través de la vida comunitaria la gente puede aprender que el teléfono móvil es un arma poderosa en la guerra o en la lucha por la competencia económica, pero también puede aprender que es frágil como un instrumento de emancipación. En la guerra que la gente enfrenta con su propia conciencia las armas más poderosas son la reflexividad y el afecto, dos recursos que pueden encontrar fácilmente en la vida comunitaria, más no en los aparatos (gadgets).

Palabras clave: Vida comunitaria, cultura individualística, sensaciones, no causalidad, urgencia, reflexividad, afecto.

Introduction

Community is a way of being-together related to both the sustainability and the quality of human life. This belief is supported by the traditional organization of most societies in small groups, such as the family, and in the centennial history of empirical data produced within both human and biological sciences. These two supports give consistency to the conception of communitarian life as a necessity and as a rich source of resources. Innumerable studies on poverty, social peace, demographic reproduction, child socialization, mental health, well-being and the quality of life comprise data and discussions on the communitarian organization of the being-together, as another evidence of the presence of community as a fundamental human issue.

Unfortunately, it is not the need human beings have of communitarian life that defines the ways it evolves and the support it gets to be accomplished. The globalized society is a historical moment which has added new and harder challenges to communitarian life by removing from the context many of the fundamental elements the achievement of communities relies on (Lash, 2007). The weakening of those elements has turned the development of communities within the globalized and competitive society dependent of the understanding of the syntax within which society is organized and managed (Urry, 2005). The present chapter is an analysis of that syntax. It aims at exposing some of the boundaries and contingencies imposed by the globalization process to the accomplishment of communitarian life. The main question at stake in it is "what conditions globalization has created that affect the accomplishment of communitarian life?" Through the answer of this question the identification of the grammar created by the globalized society is analyzed as part of the resources through which communities are built at the dawn of the XXI century.

Why is communitarian life a popular and traditional form of being-together?

Communitarian life consists of a particular way of being-together, or being-with. Collective shared life has been present in societies since the most primitive days of men and women in this world. Community is a transcendent form of social life for it puts the individual in a creative interdependence with the group. In it, individuals are "I" and "we" at the same time. In communities, people are not gathered as a sum but as a new collective being. The community has

been a human solution for the process of adaptation found in both, humans and many animal species such as fishes, insects and mammals. Breeding and survival are related to the way the self-other relationship is molded. Even a broad oversight of that phenomenon discloses two reasons rooting the choice of communities as a way of being-together. The first is the limited capacity of animals and humans to produce all the resources required for their survival, reproduction and development: Thus they require cooperation. Being-together is a condition which amplifies those required resources as strengthens the individual's existence.

According to Cooper (interviewed by Chia and Kollinikos, 1998) the being-together in communities is so powerful that turns the action of "understanding" into the action of "interstanding". The second reason is the persistence of the communitarian way of life *(actually, its resistance)* along the evolution undergone by both animals and humans, showing that community is an effective solution for the accomplishment of adaptation of individuals and of groups. Both animals and humans manage their interaction with the world always looking for the best way to be-with and to explore each other's resources. Communitarian life has been the model chosen for millennia and is far from being overcome or set aside, even within the hard conditions imposed by the globalized world.

In investigations of "why communitarian life has succeeded?" it will not be difficult to realize that such a form of being-together has to do with fundamental resources of life such as support, trust, preservation, sharing and well-being. In few words, communitarian life is an adequate setting for the accomplishment of the human condition for its capacity to optimize those resources, and thus fosters long term hope. Within communities, individuals are preserved in their individualities, they find support in sharing activities with others and may get confidence and wings for the development of their potentialities. These conditions make communitarian life an object resistant to fragmentation and to disappearance. It accomplishes the well-known belief of Gestaltism that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. If this belief this is true, the study of communities has challenged researchers because it requires steps beyond the functional question in such a way that the very understanding of the human condition is grasped as an object of study.

That challenge stems from the several faces communitarian life has; it is like a polyhedron - an object of several sides in which every side may provide information about itself and the others, to which it borders, but not really information about the whole. Besides that, just as

Gilles Deleuze (1980) understood, communitarian life is a mesh of intertwined connections like a rhizome in which the starting and ending points mesh, turning the investigation of causes and consequences an ambiguous issue. Accordingly, communitarian life can be applied and studied as a practical resource, as an economical condition, as a culture, as an ideology, as an expression of social life, as a context of reciprocity, as a network of psychological contracts, as a set of small groups and as a milieu of affection. Each of these features is like a side of the polyhedron. As the polyhedron does not exist when one takes only a single or few of its sides, community ceases its existence if some of its several features are isolated from the whole. That is the reason why communities are a continuous process of rebuilding the being-together and require methodologies capable of grasping the whole. Psychological contracts, identity and leadership are other concepts which share that sort of challenge with the concept of community.

Considering that theoretical background, it is not difficult to imagine a new track of issues and problems posed to communities by the changes fostered in society over the past four decades by the compression of time and space, as the main consequence of the spread of new tele-information technologies. These changes, today known as globalization, have created hurdles to the achievement and development of communitarian life, as anyone can observe in the difficulties met by communities such as the family to build itself as a community within the globalized context. These hurdles affect the background of communitarian life as shown in the next section.

Hurdles globalization poses to communitarian life.

One of the most evident of these hurdles is the subjection of routine, social and affective lives to the determinisms of technology. Technological procedures have become a mediator in the self-other relationship. Information can flow between people without physical contact, be it through the eyes or the ears. Since communities rely on symbolic interaction, the limitation of those resources of communication affects the way a group is managed and mastered by its members, as that has been evidenced in today`s team work.

Another hurdle is the culture of individualism and urgency which is creating the a-temporal person. This person, as Nicole Aubert (2003) has beautifully analyzed, spreads fast. That person is fueled by a wide bombardment of information, made possible by the electronic

ubiquity produced mainly by the mobile phone. The a-temporal person behaves through "impulsive zappings" with a view to "spots", "fasts" and "clips", thus producing a new pattern of relationship with the other and the environment. Within these new conditions it is easy for people to escape from the local context of their existence. A fundamental condition of communitarian life is swept away thus changing the way the individual is "I" and "we" at the same time.

A third hurdle stemming from globalization is the fragmentation of life. The dealing with life, isolating its parts as fragments is an increasing trend in the production of manufactured goods and services. Events and actions can be and have been detached from their contexts and organized separately. For instance, today the production of car and aircraft parts as well as banking activities are manufactured in hundreds of distinct places miles away from each other and put together by anonymous workers or by machines. Much more radical than in Taylor's times, today people don't know who may be involved in the production of the things and services they need nor can they see the several steps of the process through which they were made. To a certain extent, individuals are detached from the activities which are essential elements of the construction of reciprocity – another fundamental condition of communitarian life.

Yet another hurdle is the economic instability, which within the globalized context sets people miles away from the means required to balance their social and affective life. For the past two decades, several countries have undergone crises originating in events carried out in other countries. Democracy, sovereignty and economic balance are not issues limited to the boundaries of a particular nation, but chiefly within a context in which the prevailing commercial pattern is fierce competition. Within this context, it is hard to fuel communitarian life, for communities rely on stability and the variables directly related to the control of the latter in the hands of unknown individuals, most of the times constituting an elite group out of the reach of the community members.

As mere ordinary and daily evidences of life in the globalized era, these hurdles reveal some challenges communities face to maintain their existence and development, within a grammar which challenges the possibility of production of some of their fundamental elements such as mutuality, justice and social economic stability. Within the globalized context, that grammar has turned into a culture which is broadly named as the economy of quality *(the prevailing economic model since the 1980s)*. The economy of quality has been the ambition of most nations and enterprises (Malvezzi, 2010b). It became a general criterion for the assessment

of all sorts of outcomes, as a kind of dictatorship the world has hardly seen before. It is beyond any criticism since the things that have been done under its syntax are apparently moral and justified by the introduction of new technologies that amplify the control people have over the environment. On that rationality, most people today comply with the priority given to the system of production over the individual under the shelter of the quest for high quality standards for everything. The impacts of teleworking on families and small communities are undeniable evidence of the above referred to subjection. The economy of quality has tremendous potentialities as an applicable syntax to communitarian life but within the realms of both, an individualistic culture and the legitimacy of fierce and wild competition. It can hardly give any kind of support to communitarian life although it has been legitimized as the path for the development of society.

In very simple terms, from the late seventies, the economy of quality has been fueled by a rationality which explores the potentials of objects, situations and events with a view to optimize both the resources and the results. That exploration within a fragmented context subjects the process of production to the mastery of the moral of results. According to that moral, any action which improves the results deserves approval, may get priority and therefore should be implemented. That rationality came to fit to the commercial competition and as such, evolved to require the highest performance standards and optimized results from both individuals and institutions. In it the individual is taken as a resource detached from the communitarian life to which he/she belongs. Kallinikos (2003) conceived the worker into that grammar as the modular man *(the Lego man)* since the individual is seen and appraised under the capacity of his/her parts to add value to the results. What matters is the part of the person that contributes visibly to the optimization of the results. The individual is paid, his/her skills rated and his/her results considered in relation to his/her results; not in relation to his/her person.The grammar produced by the economy of quality has fostered the culture of individualism, fragmentation and urgency which, allied to the easy access to technologies and other resources, has empowered individuals, enabling them to compete with institutions, such as their own families and communities. Such a power is easily turned into several sorts of weapon.

The society organized on those contingencies has been turned into a realm of paradoxes some of which can give a good sample to explain them all. Never have workers been so required for the production of quality and never have they been so vulnerable. Society stretches biological

aging at the same time that it anticipates economic aging. Individuals are required to have a defined identity at the same time that they are asked to adapt and change who they are according to the requirements of the optimization of economical outcomes. These and other paradoxes reveal the fragmentation of the way society is organized just as people became familiarized with them. Paradoxes hardly upset most people. In that society, consistency has become a short term feature, a condition which may fuel pragmatism and individualism as the prevailing elements of the XXI century cultural pattern. Within that context the whole may be a mere sum of the parts and not a virtual and collective subject as it happens with communities. A very important feature of this contrast between communitarian life and globalization is in another paradox present in the relationship between self-managed teams and the creation of the nomad worker.

The economy of quality has never stopped the quest for the exploration of the emerging potentialities present in the new technologies and the richness of teams. In the beginning of the new millennium, the outcome of that endeavor was clear: The replacement of the management of production through big organizational structures by the management of production through a network of projects. This new model of production of services and goods fostered the development of a new sort of production structure which has been named as the network of self-managed teams. In the present historical moment, this structure characterizes the highest managerial technology of production.

Today, most enterprises are constituted by and accomplish their mission through teamwork. The last figures disclose that about 80% of activities in enterprises are performed by interdependent teams and that most of the biggest enterprises are structured into self-managed teams. The figures also reveal that over the last two decades enterprises have switched the management of teams, from giving and accomplishing orders, to the foment of "shared occasioning". Virtually, everybody working in an enterprise performs through and belongs to one or more teams *(the most important required skill)*. The increase of team work expresses slow but steady decentralization through self-managed teams. Enterprises are evolving towards the building of interdependent autonomy through networks of project management. That kind of decentralization requires cooperation as the collective pattern of performance. Cooperation is sap of communitarian life. Self-managed teams work dependent on interaction and communication as their central managerial instrument because production relies on the integration of information. Teams foster and carry out all sorts of information, scenarios and criteria confrontations

(discussions), negotiations, legitimacy and creation. Members of self-managed teams are not confined to the role of mere executing hands but are fundamental creators of targets, producers of designs and executers of actions. Individuals discuss, decide and perform. Today, the more knowledge intensive is an enterprise, a department, or a project, the more it relies on decisions produced by shared knowledge created collectively through intense interaction and communication between its members. Teams behave a socio-cognitive-operative-integrated-systems of cooperation, i.e., the very set of conditions of a communitarian life. Working teams *(as required by present day enterprises)* are constituted by interdependent individuals performing tasks by complementing each other in the shared and synergistic endeavor to achieve the outcome.

Their effectiveness is the outcome of the sense of unity, the certainty and the reliance that all members are committed to the same targets *(group process)*. Teams integrate the diversity present in individual knowledge by creating common shared knowledge which is a fundamental support for the collective action required by the present day patterns of time and quality.The competence of those teams stems from the synergy of the individual`s cognitions and actions *(a contingency hardly achieved by other means than leadership and cooperation)*. As socio cognitive-operative-integrated-systems, working teams are constituted as a synergic plural performance through the management of the group interdependence *(the adaptation to the other)* and complementarity *(the recognition of the task performed by the other as a necessity)*. Those events reveal that also enterprises are applying in a peculiar way the model developed by communitarian experience although they do not foster the development of the individual as subject *(an essential feature of the communitarian model)*. The enterprise succeeds in building teams like communities although is limited in the construction of teams and individuals as subjects. Differentiated from communities, enterprises hardly know how to apply leadership out of the authoritarian control such that happens in communitarian life.

The power of leadership action is in the innovation *(production of diversity)* posed in the group process by challenging the cognitions of the group. As such a power, leadership innovates the prevailing rationality of the group by posing new designs and meanings for effective action. Accordingly, leadership has a direct impact in three fundamental processes of the group synergy (Chia, 1998). *The first* is the process of sensemaking which is the way the group differentiates and integrates the echo systems of meanings and values. Teams are a meshwork of meanings and

values that ground the understanding of actions; leaders`actions have direct impact in the dynamics of the meanings. *The second* process is the networking which is the process of redesign of the complex structure of intertwined roles. Teams are essentially a cobweb of social interaction organized by expectations of performance in relation to individuals who occupy a specific position in the group. Leaders` actions promote legitimized changes in the cobweb. *The third* process is the enactment which is the means of fostering and molding collective performance. Teams are a network of activities functionally integrated which as a whole produce the evidences that give empirical support for the validation of meanings, values and roles. Leaders`actions also are a source of legitimized changes in that network. Accordingly, the economy of quality is recreating the way of being-together applying the best instrument found in the communitarian model as far as these psychological processes are concerned in its external features. In fact, that new way is externally similar to a community but indeed most of self-managed teams are false communities because they do not care about the condition of subject and the pattern of reciprocity that true communities require.

That false community is a condition of easy understanding. Self-managed teams are correlated with the quality of those enterprises. Following the continuous innovation and dynamic changes, performance relies less on tasks` characteristics than on subjective features such as the sharing of information, mutual trust and team synergic cohesion.The communitarian model is a strong instrument for the creation of socio-cognitive-cooperative-integrated systems as required by the accomplishment of the network of projects. In doing so the enterprise manages the mastery of the development of virtual and individual subjects *(today restricted to the professional in charge of the strategic issues)*. One may call that hybrid model as a form of co-construction which is a collective action grounded in "networked conglomerates" wherein individuals and groups share resources for compatible targets which are not necessarily shared nor function as a team, but actually the targets are fragmented. Within co-construction conglomerates the prevailing syntax turns to be the one of effectiveness *(the moral of results)* together with the syntax of fear *(the moral of escape)* while communities work over the syntax of hope *(the moral of ideals and solidarity)*.

A particular outcome of the development of the economy of quality, that here is taken as the second feature of the economy of quality, is the transformation of workers into nomads. Today, workers are nomads not because they move like Bedouins and Guaranís used to do, but

because the workplace undergoes continuous changes and so imposes on them the endless need of adaption to the context dynamics which Margaret Archer (2000) has named as emerging properties. Since the individual is an outcome of the self-other relationship, those frequent changes in others as well as in the context make him/her change accordingly to adapt to the new contingencies – today mainly expressed through information. Globalized working life is constituted by frequent changes in the demands of new skills, the setting of distinct references and need of new identities (Malvezzi, 2010a). As any nomad, the worker is a vulnerable person since he/she faces an everlasting instability and for that he/she depends on his/her daily results. Within the communitarian life the individual may not be as vulnerable since he/she is not only an "I" but is also a "we".

As happens with all nomads, the worker balance is continuously threatened. He/she requires continuous revalidation. These two conditions make him/her instable and vulnerable. He/she is challenged by an existential impermanence, having to administer his/her life through a troubled relationship with the environment. His/her life becomes a new paradox – the management of one`s own autonomy within a context which requires compliance with the prevailing culture and the demands of production.

Today, to face the paradox, workers have to struggle to keep themselves updated. This updating is, generally speaking grounded in several actions such as the construction of a personal plan of professional development, the engagement in social and professional networks and the mastery of the adaptation of his/her own professional identity. Putting these actions into the jargon of present day culture, individuals are required to adapt, to develop, to have a wide range of alternative ways to follow, to be fast, productive, effective, resistant, competitive, successful, autonomous and committed. These features constitute the identity which is applied to all workers. If one fails in a single of these features, the risk of marginalization is always at one`s door. The quest for updating such an identity sets the globalized worker on the same track as other sorts of nomad life, which in its turn requires the being-together – collective competencies. The economic production has already solved that equation by creating the self-managed teams, as explained earlier in this chapter. The social and individual lives have not yet produced a solution for the quality of life in the globalized society.

Conclusion

In the globalization era, the building of communitarian life has proved to be a fundamental resource for the exploration of the emancipatory potentiality of subjectivity as a basic condition of the economy of quality of life. Without emancipation quality of life can scarcely be considered. Looking at self-managed teams, it is not difficult to find in them the main pillars *(synergy, creativity, collective competencies and commitment)* required by the achievement of quality in economic production. All these features have been ever present in communitarian life. May be the construction of communitarian life in the globalized society is not a matter of technologies or models, but of commitment to change society towards a sustainable human life by looking for the quality found in community.

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