

## **Community Social Psychology in Latin America: myths, dilemmas and challenges**

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### **Abstract**

Latin American Community Social Psychology (CSP) is one of the few psychological disciplines that has had an autonomous development in our region. This development has been characterized by a theoretical, methodological and applied production derived from the diverse and complex problems in our context. The development includes academic and non-academic practices and products, as evidenced by numerous undergraduate and graduate university courses and programs in the field, as well as its multiple areas of application (health, environment, education, slums, disasters, public policies), processes (organization, participation, critical reflection, consciousness raising, leadership, empowerment, feeling of belonging, identity), scopes of action (governmental and nongovernmental organizations, health centers, educational institutions, community organizations, residential communities), populations (particularly socially vulnerable and economically disadvantaged groups), activities (research, intervention, evaluation, training, negotiation, prevention, conferences, publications). The increasing number and variety of activities undertaken by CSP professionals provide support for a sustained growth of the discipline. However, has CSP's trajectory been in accordance with the needs, principles, values and goals that guided the field's birth half a century ago? Have CSP's accomplishments satisfied its founders' expectations? What is the current pertinence of such accomplishments and of the elements which oriented their fulfillment, in view of rapid and continuous changes in virtually all society's domains? Have CSP's theoretical developments contributed to solve psychosocial problems it initially aimed to address? Have methodological strategies employed, developed or adapted by CSP been useful for understanding, managing and producing knowledge about the issues addressed? In addition, considering CSP trajectory, can we refer at the end of the first decade of the millenium, to the same but grown up and established discipline, or are different CSP's emerging?, Which are some dilemmas and challenges currently confronted by researchers, academicians, practitioners, advocates, whose timings, tasks and demands vary? Are universities providing adequate training in terms of skills and tools for working with communities? Which are some of the myths on CSP that have emerged? Finally, has CSP contributed, both from inside and outside academy to ameliorate poverty in our continent? These,

as well as many other questions and answers coming from participants in the Third Conference will undoubtedly help to collectively strengthen old but still relevant directions for the discipline and to outline new ones, that will make us and the people we work with better human beings.

**Keywords:** Community social psychology, Latin America, myths, dilemmas, challenges.

## **Psicología Social Comunitaria en América Latina: Mitos, dilemas y desafíos.**

### **Resumen**

La Psicología Social Comunitaria Latinoamericana es una de las pocas disciplinas psicológicas que ha tenido un desarrollo autónomo en nuestra región. Este desarrollo se ha caracterizado por una producción teórica, metodológica y aplicada que ha sido el resultado de problemas diversos y complejos de nuestro contexto. El desarrollo incluye prácticas y productos académicos y no académicos, como queda evidenciado por numerosos cursos y programas universitarios de Psicología Comunitaria a nivel de pregrado y de posgrado, así como por sus numerosas áreas de aplicación (salud, medio ambiente, educación, barriadas, desastres, políticas públicas), procesos (organización, participación, reflexión crítica, concientización, liderazgo, empoderamiento, sentimiento de pertenencia, identidad), ámbitos de acción (organizaciones gubernamentales y no gubernamentales, centros de salud, instituciones educativas, organizaciones comunitarias, comunidades residenciales), poblaciones (en particular grupos desfavorecidos, social y económicamente vulnerables), actividades (investigación, intervención, evaluación, capacitación, negociación, prevención, conferencias, publicaciones). El incrementado número y variedad de actividades emprendidas por psicólogos sociales comunitarios profesionales provee el respaldo para el crecimiento sostenido de la disciplina. Sin embargo puede cuestionarse: ¿Ha sido congruente la trayectoria de la Psicología Social Comunitaria con las necesidades, principios, valores y metas que guiaron su nacimiento hace medio siglo? ¿Han satisfecho los logros de la Psicología Social Comunitaria las expectativas de sus fundadores? ¿Cuál es la pertinencia actual de esos logros y de los lineamientos que orientaron su realización, tomando en cuenta los cambios rápidos y continuos que experimenta la sociedad en todos sus dominios? ¿Han contribuido los desarrollos teóricos de la Psicología Social Comunitaria a resolver los problemas psicosociales que se propuso enfrentar inicialmente? ¿Han sido útiles las estrategias metodológicas empleadas, desarrolladas o adaptadas para entender, gestionar y producir conocimiento acerca de las problemáticas atendidas? Además, considerando la trayectoria de la Psicología Social Comunitaria ¿podemos referirnos al fin de la primera década de este milenio, a la misma pero crecida y establecida disciplina, o están surgiendo diferentes psicologías sociales comunitarias? ¿Cuáles son los dilemas y desafíos que enfrentan actualmente los investigadores,

académicos, practicantes y gestores que tienen tiempos, tareas y exigencias variadas? ¿Están las universidades proveyendo formación adecuada en cuanto a habilidades e instrumentos para trabajar con comunidades? ¿Cuáles son algunos de los mitos que han surgido a propósito de la Psicología Social Comunitaria? Finalmente, ¿ha contribuido la Psicología Social Comunitaria desde dentro o desde fuera de la academia a disminuir la pobreza en nuestro continente? Éstas, y muchas otras preguntas y respuestas que aportaron los participantes en esta 3ª Conferencia ayudarán sin duda a fortalecer colectivamente las viejas pero todavía relevantes direcciones de nuestra disciplina y para formular nuevas que nos harán a nosotros y a la gente con la que trabajamos mejores seres humanos.

**Palabras clave:** Psicología Social Comunitaria, América Latina, mitos, dilemas, desafíos.

## **Introduction**

Community Social Psychology (CSP) is one of the few areas of psychology that has had an indigenous development in Latin America that is, generated from the diverse and complex peculiarities and problems of our reality. Almost four decades after its inception and having as guidance the commitment to contribute to reducing poverty, inequality and exclusion; academic and extra academic contributions in the field are numerous and represent a sustained growth of the discipline.

But what have been the trends and scope of such contributions to the development of the CSP? Do they converge with each other? What have been the implications for the goals of the CSP? Are these goals still valid or should they be reformulated and why? In the first case, what changes would we have to enter into the discipline to deepen or broaden its impact? In the second case, how would they have to be restated?

The answers to these questions are not simple or unique, nor do they obey the criteria of absolute or generalizable truths. They are like the discipline itself: complex, diverse, dynamic, and defiant. Therefore we do not claim to answer them, but to share our outlook with the readers on these issues, whose systematization is regularly updated, product of a long practice that integrates teaching, research, action and reflection with students and colleagues. Also, thanks to the invitation to participate in this symposium organized for the Third International Conference on Community Psychology. Events like these deserve that we put our daily activities on hold in order to meditate and write about community experiences lived with its players and others associated with them, from different places (school, residential communities, government agencies), and whose speed, intensity, requirements and urgency leave little time for this vital work. I thank the organizers of this conference for inviting me and for the opportunity to update and write about what I will now proceed to present.

The text is organized into two parts. The first part refers to some features of the Latin American context, as a field of production of CSP and the definition, purpose and development trends of the discipline. The second part focuses on a set of questions, ideas and proposals generated from the analysis of these trends and in general of contributions and Latin American experiences with CSP, which reinforce or rethink old ways and open new ones for our community psychosocial work and for the discipline itself.

## **First Part**

### **1. Development context of CSP: poverty in Latin America.**

The purposes of PSC are directly linked to the characteristics of the Latin American context, particularly its conditions of poverty that direct psychosocial community work to economically vulnerable sectors of society. Let us illustrate this situation with some recent data. On November 30, 2010, the Report on the Social Panorama of Latin America (CEPAL, 2010), based on the economic analysis of 19 Latin American countries (Argentina, the Multicultural State of Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Dominican Republic and Uruguay), estimated that by late 2010 the number of poor in the region would be of 180 million, and of these, 72 million would be in a position of destitution. These figures represent 32.1% and 12.9%, respectively, of the Latin American population and suggest a decline in poverty of 1.0% and of indigence of 0.4% compared to 2009, when the international economic crisis reversed poverty reduction levels for the 2003-2008 period. Notwithstanding the estimate for 2010, in which inequality, in terms of the income of different socioeconomic strata, increased in the last decade (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2009; ECLAC, 2008, 2009) and levels of poverty continue to be critical particularly in precarious urban settlements (ECLAC, 2009; UNPD, 2009).

The high growth rate and population density, with inadequate living conditions in these settlements, are a threat to the survival of its people and an obstacle for the development of countries (Urban 21, 2000). The magnitude of this problem prompted the Organization of the United Nations to consider poverty reduction as a priority issue for policy in developing countries (The World Bank Group, 2004; UNDP, 2008) and promoted the development of the "Millennium Declaration". This is an agreement in which the 189 countries that make up the United Nations committed to joint efforts to build a safer, more prosperous and more equitable world and formulated an action plan to reduce the number of people living in extreme poverty (income less than one dollar a day) by 2015 to half of what it was in 1990, representing Latin America and the Caribbean's 10.5 million people (UNFPA, 2008; Trigo, 2004). However, it is expected that only 7 Latin American countries can achieve this (Demian, 2008).

The complexity of this issue calls for a change in the conditions that sustain this state of affairs, from which the dominant model of science does not escape. In this regard, Calhoun (2007) calls for more public social science in the sense of social relevance and interference in public affairs, in order to increase their social relevance at the same time as strengthening the discipline. CSP is precisely an example of this alternative model of science due to the issues that concern it, the objectives and approaches, principles and values that guide it in order to achieve them. In line with this idea, several areas of knowledge and Latin American and international organizations have recognized the contribution of community organization and participation, and of the empowerment and strengthening of the members of poor communities as key processes for overcoming poverty, which is fully in accord with the principles of the CSP.

## **2. Community Social Psychology: definition**

CSP, in my view, is a discipline that seeks to understand and influence, from and with communities in areas, situations, conditions and psychosocial processes related to the quality of life of groups in situations of inequality and insecurity, in order for them to acquire or strengthen capacities and skills that will allow them to co-manage resources along with other actors in order to ensure decent living conditions, which coincide with the values of democracy.

## **3. CSP: purposes.**

As suggested by the above definition, a central purpose in CSP is to contribute to the fairness of oppressed and excluded sectors in society, promoting psychosocial changes of various types (affective, discursive, ideological, cognitive, relational, behavioral) on different scales (from micro to macro), environments (residential, institutional, academic, community), actors (government, civil society, community, professional). At the same time an attempt is made to consolidate the development of this discipline, which we have broken down into the following categories and purposes:

### **3.1 Level or scale of change**

**3.1.1 Macrosocial or level of social structure:** Facilitates the transformation from a state of dependency, inequality, exclusion, injustice, oppression, mainly related to the problem of poverty.



**3.1.2 Microsocial, or individual and human group scale:** Promotes psychosocial processes (collectively building awareness, sense of community, identity, shared emotional bonds, democratic leadership, organization, participation, increase in power) that promote the transformation of conditions that threaten social, community and individual welfare.

### **3.2 Environment**

**3.2.1 Residential:** To achieve the transformation from socio-environmental and adverse residential conditions, primarily in precarious settlements (provision of habitable housing, services and infrastructure, food, education).

**3.2.2 Institutional:** To influence government bodies, decision-makers and implementers of public policy, as well as others who perform community service or support communities to (re) conduct or enhance their resources and contributions to the satisfaction of the community.

### **3.2.3 Academic**

3.2.3.1 Discipline: To build a discipline with relevance to the context, that is socially relevant.

3.2.3.2: Paradigmatic: To take on alternative paradigmatic perspectives, consistent with the problems of the context and the goals of the discipline.

3.2.3.3 Theoretical-substantive: To extend the conceptual framework toward approaches that address the processes, areas and actors required for the established target and generate knowledge that integrates different types of wisdom.

3.2.3.4 Methodological-instrumental: To develop appropriate strategies and tools to approach issues and contexts.

3.2.3.5 Information-divulging: To democratize knowledge in order to promote equity, justice and to strengthen disadvantaged sectors.

3.2.3.6 Interdisciplinary: To expand comprehensive frames with interdisciplinary outlooks.

3.2.3.7 Teaching: To take on community psychosocial work as an experience of lifelong learning, through training, reflection and exchange of knowledge and experiences.

3.2.3.8. Ethical-political: To vindicate participation as a mechanism to influence decision-making, for the exercise of citizenship and the enjoyment of rights, beyond the satisfaction of needs.

#### **4. Trends in CSP: What did we find?**

To refer to the trends of CSP and to the correspondence between trends and the relevance of community psychosocial production in order to meet the demands faced by its practitioners, requires a rigorous and comprehensive review and analysis of the state of the art in this field as well as contextualizing this production. To fulfill part of this task, the review focused on CSP works published in the proceedings of the Inter-American Congress of Psychology in 2005, 2007 and 2009 (Wiesenfeld and Astorga, 2009), supplemented with information from text collections and Latin American contributions to the area (Alfaro, 2000; Arango, 2007; De Freitas, 1996; Montero, 1984, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006; Sánchez 2001; Wiesenfeld and Sánchez, 1995; Serrano-García and López M., et al. 1987; Serrano-García and Rosario, 1992; Serrano-García, 2009).

51 articles were reviewed, 16 from 2005 (Varas and Serrano-García, editors), 17 from 2007 (Saforcada, E., Cervone, N, Castella, J; Lapalma, A. and De Lellis, M. , compilers) and 18 from 2009 (Cintrón, Acosta, and Díaz, editors). The review of these articles was undertaken considering: the type of work (theoretical or empirical), its theoretical foundations, methodology, participants and beneficiaries of the work areas or areas of performance and impact on community views and the community at large, and the type of relationship that this work maintains with the goals of CSP.

Of the work reported on, 45% is theoretical and 55% empirical. At the theoretical level, it is evident a diversity of conceptual frameworks (social representations, psychoanalysis, theory of semantic networks and other cognitive models, gender studies, concepts of philosophy and sociology, including interdisciplinary approaches, among others), only a quarter of the articles (25%) is based on approaches such as social constructionism, traditionally regarded as characteristic of CSP.

For the analysis of the type of methodology used, out of 28 empirical studies presented, only 6 (21%) used Participatory Action Research (PAR) or Participatory Research (PR), considered the most suited to the characteristics, principles and values of CSP (Suárez, 2005; Sierra and Reidl, 2007; Zaldúa, Sopransi, Veloso and Longo, 2009; Estrada, 2009; Echeverría,

Castillo and Cortés, 2009) and 22 (79%) used methodologies different from this methodological strategy.

The works include among participants: individuals and / collectives (groups, organizations, geographic and functional communities), age groups ranging from infancy to older adults, healthy and diseased participants with various educational, social and cultural levels, caregivers and people needing care from others, among many others. The fields of inquiry and action with these participants included educational, labor, cultural, health, residential settings.(Echeverría, Castillo and Cortés, 2009; De Assis, Biasoli and Nunes, 2009; Arnosó Martínez, Elgorriaga and Otero, 2009; Samaniego, Antivero, Bártolo, Bonzo, Stesh, Domínguez, García, Iurcovich and Villegas, 2005; Suárez 2005).

The inclusion of this variety of participants and environments is suggestive of the usefulness of work incorporating the community dimension in order to understand, speak, and change the conditions, problems, needs and potential of a wide range of people and contexts.

Reflection on community issues, as part of the framework of analysis undertaken, emerged in response to some papers published in the reports/recollections, whose focuses seemed to deviate from the budgets and methodology of CSP (for example, work was done with individuals rather than communities, methods used were quasi-experimental or statistical or manipulative rather than participatory, assessments or interventions consisted of individual interventions and not on the collective and active transformation of the participants) (Samaniego et al., 2005; Smith, 2005; Auyón, Estrada, Grazioso, García, Samayoa and Peláez, 2009; Domínguez, Chambers and Procidano, 2009). This overview led us to ask ourselves why they were included in these books and in response we identified the existence of different senses of community as well as possible connections between the work carried out with experimental and other approaches, and CSP. Thus, and without implying solidarity with the inclusion criteria of the work, in memories/recollections of 2005, 2007 and 2009, community is associated with:

- Concepts and processes of community psychology (empowerment, participation, communication, dialogue, etc.)(Miranda, 2005; Fuks, 2007; Miranda, 2009).
- Diverse populations that benefit from community psychosocial work or on which the research was conducted, which are considered communities (schools, work groups, cultural groups, health organizations, geographical communities, etc.)

(Ortíz, Nieves, Gómez and Malave, 2005; Peláez, 2007; De Assis, Biasoli and Nunes, 2009).

- Subjects studied (youth, unmarried mothers, social participation, poverty, environmental impact, etc.) related to both the communal, as well as many other aspects of a social character, such as public policy, culture and development, among others (Legaspi and Aisenson, 2005; Sierra and Reidl, 2007; Estrada, 2009).
- Instruments, diagnostic evaluations, concepts, and empirical knowledge related to the communities and stakeholders who care for them (Samaniego et al., 2005; Domínguez et al., 2009).
- Issues addressed by CSP and other fields of psychology (political, clinical, counseling, environmental) or other disciplines (sociology, anthropology) (Star and Walters, 2005; Maldonado, Cayupil and Maldonado, 2007; Domínguez, Torres, Akemi, Ciancia, Hernández and Pantoja, 2009).

In summary, the review of the literature showed diverse contributions to the discipline and its development: concepts, relationships, methods, attention and problem solving, and other types of application of CSP.

Thus, theoretical studies contributed to the discipline by emphasizing the importance of some concepts for CSP (social memory), explored the tensions that exist between that which is social and which is community in what refers to CSP (Miranda, 2005), critical reviews conducted of IAP ; showed tension between CSP and clinical psychology and how psychosocial interventions can be made from psychoanalysis; explored areas that are currently of great interest to CSP, such as public policy; and showed how the discipline is relevant to the development of these; emphasized the community and / or social dimension of some human actors (homosexuality, youth social networks); allowed for the update and reflection on the discipline or the making of further theoretical contributions (concerning values, participation, etc.).

On its part, empirical research contributed to the discipline and its processes by strengthening or providing concrete tools to participants to solve problems (smokers, communities with health problems, unmarried mothers); to observe how NGOs can aid in combating discrimination and stigma, and be a stage for emancipation and citizenship; to provide tools (inventories) that facilitate the identification of community needs and the implementation of

programs; to enable participatory processes, encouraging the exercise of power on the populations concerned in the studies, to produce empirical and / or theoretical information useful for the implementation of community strategies; to achieve changes in the quality of life of people (children with AIDS); contributing to the realization of interdisciplinary approaches; to provide concrete recommendations for poverty reduction.

Despite these contributions, the contents of most of these works did not pinpoint the theoretical contributions to the body of knowledge of CSP and, as demanded by CSP, their application, nor the advantages of using similar different or even incompatible research methods other than participatory action research which is the methodological strategy favored by CSP.

With regard to processes central to the discipline, such as community participation, their impact was not reported in terms of knowledge production and the changes that it hopes its implementation will provoke. For example, did the peoples' power increase? Was the experience transferred to other situations, contexts or populations? Was public policy impacted through participation?

The same thing happened with the interventions reported. It was not easy to identify the level and type of change achieved for communities, for the discipline, or for other areas and actors. Being that it is precisely change that is an essential purpose of CSP.

If we compare these results with those expected to meet the aims formulated for CSP, we note that work was done mostly at the micro level, covering a range of participants and locations. The correspondence of these with the notion of community is compromised, as they do not provide rationale to justify such a choice.

With regard to academic goals, one way or another the work as a whole did meet the expectations referred to in almost all sub categories of this target, (disciplinary, paradigmatic, conceptual, methodological, interdisciplinary, educational, ethical, political) This does not mean that every work included at least one or more of these categories or those who did had the scope and projection expected.

We do not know if the type of information we'd like to see is missing due, among several options, to the lack of clear criteria for selection of the works or to the traditional manner of reporting scientific research and experiences, whose format requirements, guidelines, content, extension, undermine the rendering of the information that we demand. These uncertainties pose challenges such as that of promoting different, creative, accessible and understandable reports

that ensure greater and better disclosure of the efforts in their respective areas of activity and their diversification in terms of various audiences interested in the subject.

Now, on to the second part of this paper.

## **Part Two: Reflections, Questions and Proposals.**

In this section I discuss some essential components for the development of CSP, and for the fulfillment of its goals including: community, actors, relationships and processes. I must warn, however, that supplemented with the reviews above, questions, reflections and proposals, are based primarily on our long coexistence with the discipline in combination with environmental psychology, academia, communities and various institutions and government teams.

### **1. The Community.**

#### **1.1 The community and its forms of (non) existence: heterogeneous, diverse, invisible, homogeneous**

The references to community in literature, a sample of which is the review carried out, account for multiple uses of the term, as well as a variety of community types and differences among its members, with regard to their community life. This heterogeneity, however, does not include all those who are a part of the community.

On the one hand, invisible sectors of the community (who do not lead or star in community processes, silent, dissident voices from leadership, those who do not participate in community activities), while on the other hand people with whom CSP professionals typically work are designated in the community context as "the community", suggesting that this variable number of committed people who are always involved, represents the other members.

This trend toward generalization not only distorts community reality by annulling the diversity of activities that constitute everyday community life, but also renders anonymous the protagonists that streamline processes and mobilize people; these are the people who show their faces in difficult situations. We believe that, on the one hand, this imbalance relieves community members of responsibilities when, either due to apathy, indifference, work overload, health reasons or whatever, benefit from the efforts of others. On the other hand, the imbalance at hand relieves leaders and external agents of responsibilities, who overlook or ignore the particular problems of those who feel inhibited or are not able to participate.

To recognize the intermittencies and fluctuations of the community will recover, in a conscious and critical manner, the amplitude of this central concept for the discipline and its processes, and therefore the scope of community work, and propose criteria to delimit it. We ask, however, what munitions, as Thomas Ibáñez would say (2001), we need to manage ourselves in multiple diverse and changing communities?

### **1.2 Community limits: transcending the local.**

Part of the community complexity has to do with its geographical boundaries. Although the trend of CSP has been to work with spatially bound communities, at a local and micro level, it is necessary to transcend to a higher level, without neglecting the micro. In this way, and to encourage the shift from the conception of the problems in the communities from individual to collective, we must also convene a reflection on the limits of these problems beyond the community level, promoting rapprochement between communities and community institutions with similar problems, transferring successful experiences and learning from them. Doing so would facilitate meeting the goals of CSP; however this requires that we ask: What have been the reasons that have hampered going beyond the performance scales of CSP?

### **2. The actors and their variations: auto and hetero-conceptions.**

Community psychosocial work calls for the interference of different actors, and the differences within and between them, resemble, in their specificity those considered for the community.

Thus we often refer to other agents involved with the communities, whether they are government, university or professional, negating their diversity and ignoring the transformations that are generated in the discussions, conversations, confrontations and negotiations within and between actors.

In this way, each actor develops concepts about himself and others, influence the forms of relating and of interacting with each other and the rest of society. But how does the community actor build himself and other members of the community? How do the State, academia or others build him/them, assuming as we noted, their internal diversities? Moreover, how is the CSP professional given meaning in accordance with his/her workplace (government official or non-government agent, academic or activist or social advocate? What use does he give the tools

provided by the discipline to reconcile discrepancies in his environment and how does he move them to the relationship with others? And finally, how is the State conceived by different actors?

### **3. The actors and their (inter) relations.**

The various facets of community stakeholders are evidence of the plurality of modes of interacting conditioned by, among others, the knowledge or the (pre) judgment and direct or vicarious experiences with them. This kaleidoscope deserves that space be devoted to some of these actors and their (inter) relationships.

#### **3.1 The third agent: (un) necessary and / or (un) desirable.**

The consideration of the government actor or third agent (Wiesenfeld, 2000) ignored in the literature and CSP projects is of great relevance for the discipline. First, the shortcomings faced by communities which are of particular interest to CSP, are directly related to public policies formulated and implemented by these agents. Secondly, self-management has been a process valued as a strategy for achieving the community's requirements and to strengthen its members, but it also means unloading its duties on those who have the responsibility of ensuring citizens' rights and in turn overloading those who already carry on the struggle for subsistence with responsibilities. Viewed in this way, the interaction between third agent/community is evident. However, this co-implication is not easy, which is also obvious when considering what has happened in general terms on the government side and in the community. Thus, social policies have failed to reduce poverty significantly, hence their effectiveness, and in general the State's role in its relationship with communities, leaves much to be desired and has encouraged the incredulity of this sector.

The discontent of communities due to their long-standing unmet expectations has been manifested, among other ways, in historical claims to successive governments for their unwillingness to solve social problems, in distrust and rejection of these agencies and in the discredit of populist and interventionist measures. From the community side, community participation (CP) promoted by CSP, has as one of its aims to influence those policies as a strategy for incorporating community perspectives on the public agenda and thus claim the satisfaction of their needs and other rights. However, CP has not made an impact at the public policy level, nor and has it made the other actors who share responsibility in solving social problems assume their functions in a co-managerial way. In fact, self-management remains the



predominant form in which the poor meet their needs, a sample of which is the large number of Latin American people who self-construct their homes and reside in the so-called poverty belts.

It is evident that, without diminishing the contributions made by CSP, the psychosocial and community workers have a long way to travel, especially when there are even disagreements amongst ourselves concerning our performance, such as the questioning or the acceptance of handouts controlled by organizations following the institutionalization of service programs (Krause Jacobs and Jaramillo, 1998; Krause Jacobs, 2002), or of forms of participation induced by the State, which distort the voluntary and emancipating character of the process (Wiesenfeld and Sánchez, 2009).

This scenario raises several questions we must ask ourselves: How to address the relationship between State and community? Does work with organizations that represent the status quo represent a betrayal of the principles, values and goals of CSP? Is the State or government entity always an opponent the community must resist or confront? In the case of Venezuela, how to handle oneself before a state with emancipatory discourse similar to that of CSP, but with actions judged to be contrary to these, from the perspective of government critics? How to position oneself with local government agencies, opponents to the central policy of the State, whose management is also presented as transformative, but is it interfered by the ruling party? Is it possible or even desirable in the interest of CSP goals, to avoid the link with this third agent?

Additionally, how can we make personal interests compatible with academic, professional, and community interests, that are not always in harmony? How to reconcile the ruling-opposition polarization within the same type of actor, such as CSP professionals, who above such differences defend the means and ends of CSP? How to exploit these differences in terms of training opportunities for our students? Obviously this is an issue that in contexts such as those of Venezuela, are part of everyday life. It is a challenge then, for our colleagues from other countries, as for those involved to make this situation visible so the solutions will benefit the education of critical and sensitive professionals, with broad perspectives and respect for differences and with tools to address them; and above all with the commitment to place ethics over ideology and personal positions in working with communities.

Moreover, if we return to the idea that diversity congregates in each sector, how to enhance the effectiveness of psychosocial processes that we promote in the communities

(addressing problems, creating awareness, participation, negotiation), with the third agent, to influence decision-making in that environment? If we intend to do it, it will not be the official discourse in favor of or against community participation which causes the desired changes, but the will and community mobilization in the conviction of the legitimacy of their demands and the strength of their actions.

Although the CSP has had little foray into this field, we are not proposing something unprecedented. On the contrary, we are appealing to proposals from models such as participatory governance, or recent approaches to sustainable development that have been made from other disciplines and latitudes. In conclusion, the challenge we face is threefold: with the third agent, with the communities, with ourselves.

And we ask ourselves why? Let's talk about those who exercise CSP.

### **3.2 The backward exclusion.**

A value that is shared in CSP is inclusion. However, we have intentionally overlooked, reasoned and even reasonable, social sectors with features alien or contrary to the community focus of the discipline (e.g. dominant sectors considered the middle class, or which threaten community interests, such as government entities). In doing so however, are we not reproducing exclusion backwards? Aren't we condemning them as actors not susceptible to transformation? Aren't we underestimating our own potential influence to impact these sectors with influence on the circumstances of these communities?

The inclusion of all stakeholders provides, in our view, access and understanding of their views and thus the advantages and difficulties coming from outsiders to the communities to achieve their requirements. This understanding also contributes to the formulation of proposals drawn on various perspectives and approaches to the same situation, based on knowledge of that set (Brinton Lykes, 1997).

However, are all the relevant parties, or is even a single party, willing and interested in this listing? If not, how to neutralize the negative influences of these sectors in the promotion of community processes? And if so, what tools can CSP provide to facilitate the implementation of inclusion without undermining the purpose of CSP or affecting the interests of the community? If we believe in the possibilities of human change, why not extrapolate this belief to areas and sectors of society that like it or not impact the sectors we work with?

### **3.3 CSP professionals and self-exclusion.**

Another value that is shared on the CSP side is positioning on the side of the need and who suffers it, although in a reasoned not unconditional manner. This bias involves committed subjectivities, as postulated by constructionist and critical approaches widely adopted by the discipline (Wiesenfeld, 2000). However, paradoxically, professionals of CSP have also been absent from our own reports (Goncalves, 2006). They do not reflect the experiences of professionals as actors in the process they report. We do not relay the impact of experiences, learning or derivatives thereof; in short anything that positions or makes us visible in the literature. What accounts for this absence? Why have we not problematized our silence? Have we even noticed it?

We believe this policy has to do partly with traditional forms of publishing, in which the author fades within his own narrative due to the requirements of the posting rules which respond to the criteria of traditional scientific paradigms. Another possible interpretation is the isolation of our professional practice, which is paradoxical in a discipline oriented to building community with action, reflection and affection. In this regard, we have not generated sufficient space for dialogue and reflection with our peers on our concerns, achievements, difficulties, feelings that emerge in our work with communities. As the Participatory Action Research strategy states, dialogue based on praxis and actions stimulated by group reflections are ways of enriching human beings, citizens, professionals and of contributing to the development of CSP. Why not then assume them for our own processes as a community?

### **3.4 The mutual idealization between professionals and communities.**

The principle of engagement with communities is a key issue in the bond of professionals with them. But their ways of interpreting and acting, both on the professional and community side are not without difficulty. In this regard we ask: what does commitment with communities mean? How do we handle it when we differ with the community's attitudes or actions, particularly those of its leadership?

Often the implementation of these principles is understood, from the professional, particularly the academic side, as a valuation and idealization of everything that happens in communities without problematizing or questioning it. This trend has to do with the glare of

novel contexts and experiences that inspire admiration and solidarity, and indeed often the desire to become "the other."

This type of relationship leads to a kind of engagement in which there is a risk of ignoring, underestimating or dismissing scientific knowledge as trivial or disconnected from the realities of the community. In this regard, this way of bonding can lead to a kind of activist coexistence that can benefit the community as it has a trained resource unconditional to its requirements. However, the discipline loses valuable feedback and necessary reflection for its development and therefore optimization in the performance of its goals.

This enchantment also has another side that is what happens from community members towards professionals, prioritizing the knowledge of the "expert", over their own knowledge, often arising from experiences other than those of the professionals.

Hence the importance of sharing the concerns raised in community work, in order to contextualize and understand individual perspectives and maximize their gains for the parties involved.

### **3.5 The academia-community relationship.**

Professionals of CSP assigned to academia face particular circumstances inherent in university regulations.

#### **3.5.1 The time dimension or university-community time incompatibility.**

One of these circumstances relates to the incompatibility between academic and community times, which is the basis of the programmatic structure of the university curriculum of study. Its organization in defined periods, is contrary to the dynamics of the everyday life of communities, where problems do not wait for the start of the semester to arise. In this sense, if community issues discussed with students and teachers respond to methods that allow us to identify, prioritize and address priority issues with a rationale in which academic time is not considered, then how to solve this time limitation, without affecting the community nor transgressing academic lapses?

#### **3.5.2 Dual loyalty.**

On the other hand the academics engaged in the field of CSP have a dual commitment: to the community and to teaching and knowledge production, which under the aforementioned demands put them in the face of the dilemma of how to facilitate community problem-solving or teaching and disciplinary development.

In fact, analysis of the publications presented in the first part of this paper, as well as the results of previous and recent reviews (Serrano-García, 2009) show the reports are mainly from teachers and university students who pursue studies linked to the community psychosocial area. These reports refer to the dissemination of successful experiences and to the positive side of experiences, leaving aside the difficulties and other collateral processes. Reports did not include the implication of the research and / or intervention as far as the principles, values and goals that guide the discipline or the theoretical and methodological development of CSP.

### **3.5.3 Practicing professionals.**

On the other hand, productivity outside the academy is unknown, while the dynamics of this task leave little room for reflection, systematization and writing of articles or texts in the terms required by the literature to which we must add the possible absence of motivation of professionals in this activity. The implications of these works often remain in the memory of their actors, which creates a vacuum of information relevant to the development of the discipline. The above requires, firstly, the need to generate alternative formats for the development and dissemination of experiences in CSP outside academia, and secondly to encourage creative spaces for dialogue between professionals working in different organizations.

## **4. Notes and questions on other topics / goals.**

### **4.1 On theoretical production and methodology: coherence between objectives and results**

The report of experiences without the reflective and theoretical counterpart, or theorizing on such experiences is responsible for another lack of information in publications in the area. We refer to the lack of theoretical production derived from complying with the research-action-reflection-production of theory cycle, which characterizes the methodological strategy of Participatory Action Research (PAR), favored by the CSP. We ask ourselves, is it feasible to target the production of knowledge through the use of PAR, is this goal feasible for an academic

without sacrificing the products with which he/she is assessed in this environment? In this vein, what has been the effectiveness and contributions of methodological strategies employed in our discipline, such as PAR, in the light of the limitations exposed? How much of the theoretical production in CSP comes from community involvement experiences of PAR?

#### **4.2 Participation in PAR.**

PAR poses co-research between researchers and community to generate knowledge sets of everyday situations that reflect and redefine, and on which we act based on their new significance. This cycle legitimizes the knowledge produced and increases the welfare of the community. But to what extent is such participation met? How many people participate, and who are they? Are they representative of the plurality that characterizes an inclusive and democratic process? Are those who yield or who do not have the role of key informants or leaders encouraged?

#### **4.3 Regarding the processes: involvement.**

Participation (P) not only has been and remains a fundamental pillar of the community psychosocial task, but it has been assumed as the process for excellence in virtually all areas. P is the column that gathers, gives meaning and directs other processes that emerge and evolve concomitantly (sense of community, empowerment). Compliance with the principles and guidelines of participation is a necessary condition for achieving the goals set by CSP. However, like the notion of community, the use of the term participation has been distorted and extended to the point that it is considered a social value in itself, apart from a set of considerations that lead to increase the compliance of its postulates in our field (e.g. co-option).

#### **4.4 Interdisciplinary aspects.**

While there is a recurrent call for joint, inter, multi or trans-disciplinary projects, in practice this rarely materializes. At best, the limitations of the different fields of knowledge are recognized and professionals are called in which, according to the particular project promoters, may respond to particular requirements, by virtue of their expertise. In this regard, is there clarity about the reasons that demand cross-disciplinary endeavors, and on the constraints which remain an outstanding issue on our discipline's agenda? Perhaps the answer to these questions can help

us either to initiate this work with greater certainty and conviction that so far has converted the terms that designate the work of more than one discipline as socially desirable.

#### **4.5 Uncertainty.**

Uncertainty has become a serious problem that limits community work, particularly from academia, given that other institutions involved in community life usually do so with work commitments that involve some type of guarantees and compensation. This is not the case for teaching, research and / or community university practice in which the commitment is of another nature. Circumventing community practice for the sake of preserving personal integrity, especially of our students, is legitimate and unquestionable. In fact, several colleagues have chosen to undertake practices in "safer" communities, thereby excluding many others, where the majority of its residents could benefit from this type of work. However, our commitment as citizens and social scientists interested in contributing to alleviate the problems of communities, of which insecurity is an important part, forces us to take on the challenge of community work in environments where our education and training can be useful. If we add the educational role of community work, in terms of awareness of students and teachers themselves about the existence of that other reality with enormous potential and strengths, our commitment increases.

#### **4.6 CSP and the model of Sustainable Development.**

A model that we believe shares many of the aspirations of CSP is that of Sustainable Development, of which few professionals in our field have taken notice. In this regard, recently added dimensions of community sustainability highlight the subject area and focus for CSP as a prerequisite for sustainable development. This is, therefore, a model that, incorporating precisely a community perspective, can help achieve the objectives of CSP, many of them coincident with the Millennium Declaration, made by United Nations (2008). In this vein, we consider that the possibility of sharing a common model with other actors and disciplines could help to overcome limitations of isolation from the disciplines and actors, for whom the encounter with others is represented as a loss rather than saving time, resources and efforts. This model, due to its nature calls for precisely such an encounter, and its purpose, inspired by the preservation of the environment, placed in a more neutral level in sectors whose radical views inhibits them from such encounters.

#### **4.7 A closure that opens: Crisis or legitimacy of CSP: one or more CSP?**

Finally, where do trends identified with CSP point to? Can we consider the heterogeneity exposed, with its achievements and limitations as indicators of the richness of CSP, of different CSP's that we have to make explicit or of a crisis of CSP? Can we interpret the diversity and divergence in trends in CSP as a crisis of CSP, in its approaches, methods, paradigms and goals, which have to do with the crisis of development models in the region, and therefore deserve intense discussion by those who are assumed to be psychologists or community social psychologists?

We leave the questions open so that together we generate the responses and incorporate new questions. Only then can we collectively strengthen old but successful transition paths or outline some new ones, which in any case shall make us and of the people we work with better human beings.

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