

THE INDISSOCIABILITY OF COMMUNITY INTERVENTION AND THE ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

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This article analyses the ecological model as a dominant style of thinking inseparable from community intervention. Four essential characteristics are examined that define this thinking style: theoretical assumptions, the social construction of ecological thinking, collaborative style and psychosocial processes. From these points the role of the professional community worker and of social services is defined. A change is suggested in the action styles of professionals and institutions in order to increase the effectiveness of the work of the professional in the community.

En este artículo se hace un análisis del modelo ecológico como estilo de pensamiento dominante e inseparable de la intervención comunitaria. Se analizan cuatro características esenciales que definen este estilo de pensamiento: Supuestos teóricos, la construcción social del pensamiento ecológico, el estilo de colaboración y los procesos psicosociales. A partir de estos puntos se define el rol del profesional de la comunidad y de los servicios sociales. Se sugiere un cambio en los estilos de actuación de profesionales e instituciones para hacer más efectiva la labor de los profesionales en su trabajo con la comunidad.

An important characteristic of community research and praxis is the incidence of what has come to be called ecological orientation, which is characterised by an emphasis on the fit between people and their environments. Mann (1978) considers the most significant feature of ecological orientation to be its concern with the relationships of individuals among one other as a community and as a differentiated social group, with elaborate systems of formal and informal relations" (p.10).

From the ecological perspective it is assumed that the relationship between the professional and the community is the principal source of the process of construction of the meaning of the phenomenon to be studied. Thus, persons and systems become intelligible when they themselves are considered as part of a social context with multiple levels of analysis and perspectives. On the basis of these assumptions, the priority objective will be to make professionals and community converge semantically in order

to make community intervention effective.

It is also postulated from the ecological perspective that it is impossible to understand the meaning of persons or systems in the context, unless the professional and the community develop shared criteria for their definition. It is considered that the variety of different features in the environment affect both professionals and participants. Both are integral parts of the particular context in which community intervention takes place. Four nuclei can be identified in the ecological approach that constitute the principles and action styles of professionals and community members: theoretical assumptions, the social construction of ecological thinking, collaborative style and the psychosocial processes involved.

Theoretical assumptions

The theoretical assumptions that characterise the interrelationships of persons –professionals and community members– and contexts are as follows:

1. The meanings of people and contexts are inferred from the appreciations of the professional and the community members and from the construction of a mutual understanding of the shared context.
2. People are observed in the context in terms of their performance of the role of creators of resources list and of their ability to cope with personal, organisational and community restrictions.
3. Social contexts are observed in terms of the definition of social norms as they influence the use of

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(1) *I wrote this article, in response to a request by my friend Fernando Lluch, thinking of many of my friends working in Community Psychology in the Valencia Region, and with whom I am bound by my actions, my emotions and my thinking. I hope it will provide some support for them in their professional activity, with all its ups and downs and, curiously, with so much future.*

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resources and the responses to constrictions.

4. Social contexts modify people's shared meanings and experiences.
5. Adaptive behaviour is defined in terms of the resources people create and use in their contexts.
6. Adaptive behaviour and its criteria may vary according to the situation and the moment.
7. Relationships are reciprocal: people influence contexts and contexts influence people; people influence other people and one context influences another context.
8. The events, contexts and people outside of the immediate social context influence the expression of structures, roles and norms within social contexts.
9. Person-context transactions in a specific environment generate tangible indirect effects on the interactions of other people in other contexts.
10. Social processes may facilitate or inhibit the interdependence of people and social contexts, of roles and social norms.

The social construction of ecological knowledge

The ecological approach is situated in people's behaviour in social contexts, which are in turn related to the social construction that professionals and community members have created of their context. It is assumed that different people may have different constructions of their context.

The essential thing in the development of the ecological approach is that the participants are able to articulate in a conscious way the constrictions and opportunities that affect their own context and, consequently, their own development. A pre-requisite for the construction of one's own context is that the professional and the participants assume the ambiguity of the discovery processes.

For that which is theoretically constructed from people and social contexts to be effective, the community worker must learn and experience the events and processes related to the social construction of his/her contexts and of the contexts of the participants. The social construction of the context defines the observations of roles and norms and their interdependence with social contexts.

In the ecological approach, theoretical assumptions are verified, assessed and understood through the meaning they have for the participants that are experiencing the phenomenon. The understanding of the expression of social roles and social norms demands that participants develop a process and a plan that takes into account the

interchange of meanings between professionals and members of the community.

Collaborative style

Within the ecological perspective, the style of work is that of collaboration between professionals and community members. The collaboration process implies that the professional and the other participants define a work relationship for the integration of research and intervention. It is expected that the participants value their work collectively on redefining the joint activity. The assumed benefit of the collaborative style is that the discovery of information on the structures, roles and norms expressed in the context will strengthen the authenticity and validity, and consequently the utility of intervention (Kingry and Kelly, 1990).

The epistemological significance of collaborative relationships is that they occur in a context in which ideas are checked, elaborated, redefined, examined, re-examined and evolve. Collaborative relationships are converted into a social structure in which the processes of discovery and understanding take place. The observer–community worker– and the observed–participants– in this relationship thus create a shared agenda for the discovery and understanding of the contexts of the community.

Social processes

The validity of ecological intervention is only achieved if the participants understand the context, roles and specific interests of the collaboration programme. The comprehension of the collaboration processes and the stages and sequences involved in the design of research and intervention is necessary to create contextual knowledge.

Within the ecological approach a sequence of activities is subsumed: the community worker understands, learns and collects information on facts and phenomena in the context. The social worker is qualified to develop and review his/her concepts at the same pace as the collaborative relationship develops. What is not consistent with the ecological approach is that the social worker imposes on the participant the concepts and hypotheses that he/she has developed in his/her own mind. In this case, the professional is denying or ignoring the participants' context. The ecological approach is inductive, exploratory and contextual, and requires constant checking and feedback; the checking of ideas is achieved by going back and forth between the concepts and experience of the professional and the participants.

These four pillars of the ecological approach are interdependent. Meaning is transferred from one group to another and to the overall context. It is also assumed that research/intervention processes are constructed and influenced by their spatio-temporal and socio-political parameters, agendas or reference frameworks (Kelly et al., 1986; Ruback and Innes, 1988). The ecological approach also offers the opportunity to understand what is complex and unique in a specific context or situation.

The above reflections on the methodological and interventional assumptions of the ecological perspective invite us to define the community, the environment in which the work of the professional takes place in interaction with other persons and groups composing it.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

A word or expression frequently has several different connotations or meanings. In fact, this is a problem of the Theory of the Knowledge and of Linguistics, and is more serious when we attempt to define or to denote objects of social reality, given the complexity of these objects and the different politico-philosophical perspectives from which that social reality is considered.

I do not believe, as the positivists do, that this can be observed in a "neutral, serene and impartial" way, as French sociologist Emile Durkheim recommended in his book "The Rules of Sociological Method". For example, the expression *social classes* refers to the same reality, both for a Marxist and a functionalist, but the conceptualisation is obviously different for one or the other. Moreover, the expression may sometimes denote different realities, and from the sociology of knowledge "conceptual differences frequently mean that people observe or indicate different aspects of the same reality".

This lack of univocality, of precision, of the concepts of Community and Society should not be imputed to the diverse philosophical-political conceptions underlying Psychosociological Theories, but rather to the differential emphasis placed on one aspect or another of the realities denoted by such concepts.

The Psychosocial Perspective

From the psychosocial perspective, community and society, more than a conglomerate of human beings, are a web of social relationships. The sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, in his work "Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft" –Community and Society– stresses the psychological foundations of the social relationships making up the fabric of any group. And these relationships are rela-

tionships between wills, these being understood as the set of mechanisms that motivate and guide the behaviour of human beings.

This will takes two forms: *Organic Will* and *Reflexive Will*. *Organic Will* is natural, it is the direct expression of the human being's vital impulse, and therefore spontaneous in nature; it is directly linked to the biological organism. *Reflexive Will* is determined by thought, and is consequently artificial, in that the human being must subject his/her action to the control of reason and intelligence.

This distinction between types of will does not refer only to the level of individuals considered in isolation, but applies also to groups –the ecological model–, allowing Tönnies to distinguish two types of relationship:

1. Community relationships, which depend on the *voluntas organica*. Groups have a predominance of social relationships of a communitary nature, and therefore constitute a type of social organization: the community or *gemeinschaft*.
2. Societal relationships, which depend on the *voluntas reflexiva*. Groups have a predominance of societal relationships, constituting the opposite kind of social organization: the society or *gesellschaft*.

This first distinction between community and society, which would be taken up by many sociologists and social psychologists, demonstrates something I should like to underline: neither community nor society are conceived here in empirical terms, that is, as groups of individuals that can be situated in specific geographical spaces, but, rather, basically as specific forms or types of social relationship. On this point we already found some similarity with a certain wider definition of society, understood as "the fabric of social relations". Following on from the ideas of Tönnies, the sociologist Guy Rocher considers that:

"The community is made up of persons united by natural or spontaneous bonds, and also by common objectives that transcend the particular interests of each individual, the feelings, thoughts and actions of people, guaranteeing the cooperation of each member and the unity or union of the group. The community constitutes, then, an organic whole within which the life and interest of its members are identified with the life and interest of the group. The community is constituted of relationships that are warm, strongly impregnated with affectivity. The society, on the other hand, is the social organization of "cold" relationships in

which diversity of interests and calculation prevail... and relationships between people are established on the basis of individual interests. They are therefore relationships of competition, of rivalry, or at least social relationships that bear the stamp of indifference as far as others are concerned" (1973:111).

In sum, in the communitary society, social roles are inclusive, social relationships are personal and intimate and there are comparatively few subgroups other than those of the family and extended family. The **associative society** is represented by the large modern metropolis. It is characterized by a marked division of labour and by the proliferation of social roles. Individuals must adapt to a complex social structure in which they carry out very different roles. In the associative society, social relationships tend to be transitory, superficial and impersonal. Individuals associate with others to carry out activities with limited goals...

"Wherever the members of a group, small or large, live together in such a way that they all participate, not in this or that particular interest, but in the basic conditions of a life in common, we can call this group a Community.

What characterizes a society is precisely the fact that any one of its members can be perceived entirely within it. The basic distinctive criterion of a community resides in the fact that, within it, all of a person's social relationships can be maintained. The community is an area of social life, and is characterized by the possession of social cohesion, its foundations being location and the feeling of community" (Rocher 1973: 97).

Location, as one of the bases of community, means that the community always occupies a territorial space, even if in a transitory way. The other basis of the community, the feeling of community, which suggests a certain degree of solidarity, implies the existence of sufficient points of contact and common interests, by virtue of which is generated the identification of the individuals with the space in which they live. MacIver stresses that this identification does not result naturally from the fact of occupying a particular geographical space—that geographical location is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of the community: **THE FUNDAMENTAL THING IS THAT PEOPLE SHARE THE FEELING OF THE AWARENESS OF PARTICIPATION IN THE SAME WAY OF LIFE, IN THE SAME WAY THAT THEY ARE LINKED TO A COMMON TERRITORY.** This community feeling takes the following forms:

1. **Feeling of "Us"**: collective participation in life and the problems of the community as an indivisible whole;
2. **Feeling of Representation and Role**: the person immersed in the community must be aware that besides the roles he/she plays as an individual in society, those roles are in some way subordinate to the community as a whole. In other words, he/she cannot remain indifferent to the life of the community, since his/her social roles are in some way conditioned by the resources, obstructors, interests, problems, successes, joys and suffering of the community;
3. **Feeling of Dependence**: this refers to physical and psychological dependence. The individual needs the community to develop his/her activity, his/her life; but s/he also needs it as a kind of a refuge against solitude. The community is:
 - a. a group of people,
 - b. that inhabits a continuous territory and is in permanent social interaction,
 - c. that is brought together by past experiences and common bonds and relationships,
 - d. that possesses a large number of public service institutions,
 - e. that has awareness of unity, and
 - f. that is capable of acting in a corporate way to solve the periodic crises of life.

Thus, a community occupies a certain geographical space and its members must have had a history they recognise as theirs, and of which they are proud. These people must be aware that together they constitute a community. They will have sufficient public service institutions to satisfy their basic human needs, thus making possible the persistence of the group. Finally, they must act jointly in order to resolve any crisis that may arise and any problem that involves the collective well-being. These are the basic elements whose reciprocal action leads to the constitution of a community.

A definition that is of interest, given its contribution to the line of argument developing here, is that of Warren (1965), for whom the community is "the combination of social units that carry out the main social functions with local relevance". These functions can be grouped in five categories: 1. Production, distribution and consumption; 2. Socialisation; 3. Social control; 4. Social participation through formal and informal organisations; 5. Formal and informal mutual support. One of the most important and significant functions of the community is that of support, which moreover constitutes one of the most

important resources of community intervention, and is consequently the principal motor of the development of the community (Gracia, Herrero and Musitu, 1995; Gracia, 1997; Musitu, 1996).

The role of the Community Psychologist from the ecological perspective

The Community Psychologist's work in the community is oriented, from an ecological perspective, to social activities aimed at providing support for individuals or increasing social organization. This activity can be said to be that of helping others to do something. It provides participative exchanges that are indispensable for learning, teaching and human development. Everyone needs help; everyone can give help. Some help is effective and other help is not, and may have positive or negative effects. Above all, though, help can be a process for bringing about interdependence, for endowing the community—in accordance with the Compensatory Model—with greater power for dealing with its environment in a more effective way and motivating its members, so that they are more active and more self-sufficient (Heller, 1990; Levine et al., 1993).

The community worker is a specialist with expert knowledge which it is hoped will open up new roads to people accustomed to old ones (Kirschner, 1986). He or she, together with the members of the community, redefine the situation and prescribe the actions necessary for resolving it, the former basing him/herself on knowledge of research and community and social work, and the latter on their knowledge of the community and its processes. Docecki (1977) describes a new type of professional in line with what is proposed here in terms of the ecological approach, and whose basic aim would be that of working with community members, helping them to be more community-orientated and motivated to work for the community. It is important to stress the importance of collective behaviour and to encourage people to develop the local resources shared by the community. Support groups, self-help groups and community projects are examples of these local resources. There is a need for a new model of the role of the professional and of his/her work. The traditional roles of the professional expert often create and sustain dependence. Our challenge as community workers is to commit ourselves to an approach that enables people to be interdependent in competent, productive and satisfactory ways.

Consequently, the professional's work should be based on the following principles:

- To be positive, that is, to work from resources and potentialities, and not from deficits or pathologies.
- To promote, in a dynamic way, identities and abilities, both in people and in groups and communities.
- To pursue improvement in the quality of life of the community.
- To have an integrated, ecological and holistic conception of human development.
- To promote feelings of community and social belonging, as opposed to personal rootlessness and socio-cultural disintegration.
- To maximise the participation, control and protagonism of the community itself in the process, keeping him/herself on an equal plane, as guide, counsellor or assistant, and helping the community members to build shared meanings of norms and roles.
- To be multidisciplinary, active and flexible, and to be integrated into the community.
- To discover what already exists: that is, the people involved in networks, the structure of those networks, the community figures that may serve as key agents in intervention, the neighbourhood institutions that move the social capital of the community and can develop helping roles, the regular but informal meetings of people that share basic needs and exchange help, etc.
- To use the existing community resources for the creation, design and development of intervention programmes, involving those for whom the programmes are designed and the community as a whole.
- To strengthen and facilitate the development of informal support networks, and of any other type of group that may fulfil support roles.

The general aim is to strengthen the action carried out from the community, with the community and for the community. In order to do this, it is necessary for the social services to look for a new conceptual schema, a change of orientation, so that the search for the appropriate combination of formal and informal support systems becomes a fundamental task (Gracia, 1991; Levine et al., 1993). In this sense we should bear in mind that:

- social programmes proposed by central and regional governments should aim to support, not supplant, informal help initiatives.
- simply increasing professionalism is not the key to improving the quality of social services—the key to such improvement lies in the creative capacity for combining professional and informal resources in

any service strategy; up to now, the only approach that makes this possible is the ecological one.

- there are limits to the role of the public sector in the provision of help. A strong and vital social service requires the participation of the community members and a firm and central role of voluntary associations and informal help.

In sum, it is a question of using community resources as a positive element of change that promotes socialisation, social participation, mutual help and a situation in which people are interdependent in competent ways; of creating resources for support and growth; of setting up systems of community support and of reinforcing informal support networks (Gracia and Musitu, 1990). In this way the community develops and increases its self-efficacy and self-control.

Regrettably, I feel that the adoption and integration of this approach in Community Intervention is well overdue. Until we are fully convinced that community intervention and ecological thinking are elements of the same idea, the work of the community psychologist will be fragmented and, although it may be quite effective, it will not be equally satisfactory. And it seems to me that if thought and action are indissociable, so are action and satisfaction. Undoubtedly, both can benefit from the contribution of good ideas.

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