MAKING SENSE OF OURSELVES AND OTHERS:
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE COMMUNITY-DIVERSITY DEBATE

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In recent years, a debate has played out concerning the relationship between two of Community Psychology's core values: promoting diversity and promoting a sense of community. To elaborate on this dialectical relationship, we propose to inscribe it within the broader framework of the identity-otherness dynamics, which currently underpins a variety of disruptive socio-political processes across Europe (e.g., the decrease of solidarity in dealing with the refugee crisis, the spreading of eurosceptic attitudes, and the waves of xenophobia and populism). All these phenomena entail, either as a premise or as a consequence, the negation of otherness and diversity. Some theories in cultural and semiotic psychology suggest that a deeper understanding of the community-diversity dialectics would benefit from taking into account not only the traditional socio-cognitive processes, but also the symbolic and meaning-making processes that envelop the experience of self and the experience of otherness. This perspective would also help in developing community interventions that acknowledge both the need for belonging and identity, and the need for diversity.

***Keywords**:Community, diversity, identity, cultural psychology*

1. Introduction

The overarching goal of community psychology has always been and still is the development and empowerment of individuals, groups, and communities, especially those who have been marginalized by society. Community psychologists provide support to people, associations, and institutions, so as to enhance the quality of life of communities and to counter the effects of unequal and unjust societal structures and relationships. Indeed, within the discipline the pursuit of social justice and democracy has been closely linked to the pursuit of wellbeing (Orford, 2008; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2010). As an academic discipline with practical implications,

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community psychology has developed methodologies and strategies based on participatory processes, but it has also engaged in a debate about the most suitable principles and values to improve social relationships within communities (Prilleltensky, 2001). In dealing with issues of communities, community psychology has not only emphasized the benefits of community membership, but also acknowledged diversity within communities as a core value (Rappaport, 1977), along with empowerment and social justice.

The purpose of this paper is to present a rationale for considering community and diversity as not-opposed categories or alternative goals. To elaborate on this relationship, we take stock of the current community-diversity debate, and propose to include it within the broader framework of the identity-otherness dynamics. We discuss some models from identity research in intercultural situations and then argue that community psychology should embrace a diversity paradigm, expanding its focus beyond individuals and micro-settings. Based on a semiotic cultural psychology approach, we consider culture as a new lens through which to look at the community-diversity relationship. Finally, we outline some implications for policy-making.

2. The Community-Diversity Debate

In recent years, a debate has played out concerning the relationship between two of community psychology's core values: promoting diversity and promoting a sense of community. This is a very topical issue, as we are currently contending with disruptive socio-political processes across Europe, such as the rise of far-right populist parties and the waves of xenophobia and ethnic prejudice, which are at risk of undermining social cohesion, trust, and societal wellbeing. Most of these processes have to do with community belonging, identity, and engagement with diversity.

The community-diversity debate stems from the implications of the postulate underlining the notion of sense of community, that goes back to the well known definition offered by Sarason (1974, p. 157): "*the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure*".

Indeed, this debate has a long history, since the early concerns voiced by Esther Wiesenfeld (1996) on the risks of an essentialised view of community and the myth of "we". Wiesenfeld criticized the tendency to adopt an ontological conception of the community and of the process whereby individuals incorporate the collective identity represented by the community into their personal identity. Indeed, in this process two types of identities emerge: one, defined as *macro-belonging*, overcomes the internal divisions, goes beyond the rifts that cross the community, and manages to integrate differences and minorities in a larger entity with which everyone identifies. This macro-belonging tacitly derives from sharing a common experience of something, mainly events that take place in a common space (either physical, symbolic or mental) and in a common time. However, macro-membership is overshadowed by a number of *micro-belongings*, that is the specific collective identities that individuals build in their lifetime based on roles, interests, opinions, and reference groups.

The acknowledgement of a plurality of community memberships and of subjective belongings has caused community psychologists to shift to the notion of multiple senses of community (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Brodsky, Loomis & Marx, 2002). Hence, sense of community has been expanded to a variety of communities, both territorial and relational, both parallel and nested.

Such a shift called for the need to take into account the interactions between multiple memberships, the different salience of communities, and their combined effects.

Faced with increased diversity in society, in the last few years the community-diversity academic debate has resumed (see contributions in the special section on Diversity and Community, *American Community Psychology Journal, 59*(3-4), 2017; see also Rochira, 2018). In a nutshell, this debate revolves around the question: "Is diversity bad for the community?". An antecedent of this dispute is found in research on social capital, where Robert Putnam (2007) spread the idea that ethnic diversity reduces social cohesion. According to Putnam's constrict/conflict theory, in ethnically heterogeneous communities there is increased threat and fear that lead individuals to withdraw from social relationships and community life, either for their own or other ethnic groups. So the general conclusion is that ethnic diversity causes people to withdraw from society in general. Some studies have indeed shown that ethnicity negatively impacts social cohesion and trust (Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2010; Sturgis, Brunton-Smith, Read & Allum, 2010; Wickes, Zahnov, White & Mazerolle, 2014),while others provided only limited evidence or introduced mediators, such as threat perception or intergroup contact (McKenna et al., 2018).

Echoing the questions addressed in this strand of research, the community psychology debate has developed on similar premises and currently revolves around two alternative positions, which we will refer to as the incompatibility argument and the conditional compatibility argument.

The *incompatibility argument* is based on the reasoning that sense of community, because of its emphasis on group member similarity and homogeneity, is in conflict with diversity: therefore, it is unlikely that highly cohesive communities can encompass respect for diversity (Townley, Kloos, Green & Franco, 2011). In the same vein, Neal and Neal (2014) found evidence that in a world in which relationships are driven by homophily and proximity, acceptance of diversity and sense of community cannot be promoted simultaneously. Studies on multicultural diversity within neighbourhoods reached similar results, highlighting that, as neighbourhoods become more ethnically heterogeneous, residents' sense of community tends to decrease (Castellini, Colombo, Maffeis & Montali, 2011; Hombrados-Mendieta, Gómez-Jacinto & Dominguez-Fuentes, 2009).

The *conditional compatibility argument* opens up the possibility that both similarity and differences coexist in communities, provided that situational factors, that is, context, make them compatible. In a nutshell, this argument highlights that the experience of community can be varied and multifaceted and that the complexity of communities is so great that a variety of possibilities can unfold (Hill, 2017). Specifically, it should be considered that the perception of similarity is based both on unalterable factors, such as race, and alterable factors, such as attitudes and habits. The latter are cultural attributes that individuals can accommodate and modify in social exchanges so as to build both a common ground and respect for diversity. Stivala, Robins, Kashima, and Kirley (2016) showed that when community diversity is based on one or few unalterable factors, cultural attributes set the conditions for the development of a common basis and shared experiences among diverse groups. Studies on ethnic prejudice revealed that when community diversity is perceived to be below a critical threshold, sense of community reduces prejudice (Mannarini, Talò & Rochira, 2017). It can also increase respect for diversity, provided that community members do not feel threatened by immigrants because they are both contending for access to resources (Mannarini, Rochira & Ciavolino, 2018).

So one of the issues at stake is whether, as community psychologists, we should re-

conceptualize sense of community so as to emphasize sharedness as well as internal differences and diversity, and get rid of the similarity postulate.

3. Clues from Identity Research

A look at identity processes and theories helps us with this re-conceptualization, providing a non-oppositional vision of similarity and diversity, identity and otherness, inclusion and exclusion. If we consider that identities are embedded in social contexts, and psychosocially entangled in social relations at the interpersonal and intergroup level, both as such and by means of shared social representations, we can see that they are as much a system of exclusion as of inclusion (Duveen, 2001).

Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 1986; 2001; 2014) explicitly acknowledges the role of social representations in the processes that underpin identity construction (Breakwell, 2001). According to IPT, identity is regulated by two universal processes: assimilation–accommodation and evaluation. The former refers to the assimilation and adjustment of new information, new elements that are encountered by individuals, including new cultural perspectives, into the identity structure. The latter refers to the evaluation of the force of identity (good or bad). When the process of assimilation-accommodation is unable to respond to identity motives, or when the context hinders the satisfaction of any of them – i.e., continuity, uniqueness, self-efficacy and self-esteem, along with coherence (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), belonging and meaning (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge & Scabini, 2006) – identities are threatened. The fundamental process of assimilation-accommodation thus shows that openness towards and engagement with alternative views (i.e., diversity) are fundamentally entailed in the construction of identities.

Intergroup and acculturation research also offers many ideas and inputs for elaborating on identity processes and the diversity postulate. A number of theories have been proposed that conceptualize identities in intercultural situations. Just to name a few, the well known Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) posits that individuals can overcome prejudice if they are able to re-categorise individuals in superordinate social categories that include both ingroup and outgroup members, thereby modifying the perception of group boundaries and developing *nested dual identities*.

Individuals can also develop *mixed or ambivalent identity* profiles, that is, by being attached to their group but critical. Building on the multidimensional model identified by Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, Halevy, and Eidelson (2008), which supports a two-factor understanding of group identification –i.e., group attachment and group's positive evaluation –Haugen, Rieck, Salten, Muckerjee & Perez (2018) proposed a typology of racial identification profiles based on the combination of these two dimensions. Specifically, they show that individuals with mixed identity profiles (i.e., either those highly identified with the group but not glorifying it, or those with low attachment but thinking highly of the group) are likely to feel less threatened by diversity and more willing to engage with it.

Moreover, individuals may differ because they develop an *oppositional, hierarchical, or individualistic identity* (Sammut, 2010), according to the vision that they adopt and to the degree of openness that their perspective grants to a different point of view. Sammut and Gaskell (2010) identified: (a) a monological point of view, which is unable to envisage any alternative viewpoint; (b) a dialogical point of view, which acknowledges different perspectives, but will

subordinate them to one's own point of view; and (c) a metalogical point of view, which is aware that one's perspective is as relative as another. The metalogical perspective enables individuals to negotiate diversity and reconcile identity oppositions (Sammut, 2010) developing either a hyphenated, dual, or bicultural identity (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee & Morris, 2002), or an individualistic identity (Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault & Senécal, 1997) that leaves identity categories behind.

This very brief sketch of models and research examples opens up paths to engage with both sharedness and diversity. If identities are as much a system of exclusion as of inclusion, individuals cannot develop a sense of self unless they engage with others in the community. But if we need to feel diversity and difference to develop any sense of community, any attachment to a community, we should re-conceptualize community as a "community of others", and consider that what we share with others in the community emanates from engagement with diversity. So the question is not whether diversity and (sense of) community are compatible or incompatible, but how to build community on diversity (Howarth & Andreouli, 2016).

4. The Diversity Paradigm

Community psychologists can benefit greatly from expanding the traditional approach focused on group differences to a more inclusive and complex diversity paradigm. As recently argued by social psychologists who presented important advances in prejudice and racial inequalities research, "diversity is inherently a multidimensional, multifaceted, multilevel concept" (Jones & Dovidio, 2018, p. 14; see also Jones, Dovidio & Vietze, 2014). According to these scholars, a diversity approach requires psychology to expand its scope so as to include a *range of levels of analysis*, from the most traditional micro-level processes (individuals) and settings (groups) to institutions and social systems, up to the most macro-level processes embodied by culture. In addition, a diversity paradigm should consider a wide *range of mechanisms* beyond the individual, for example the role of social identity processes and social norms, as well as of values and worldviews. Furthermore, it should explore political and economic functioning, as well as analysing processes and effects in a variety of institutions, such as the media and the justice systems. Finally, a diversity paradigm should take into account a broad *range of relations*, devoting attention not only to the traditional majority-minority divide, but also to minority-minority and intragroup relations, and to the effects of multiple group memberships (and multiple senses of community). Such a paradigm should move beyond conflict to understand the dynamics of positive relations and the mechanisms that generate positive outcomes for individuals, groups, institutions, and communities.

These indications are perfectly attuned to the ecological-systemic approach of community psychology, as well as to its goals, and emphasize the timely need for complex models of complex community functioning and development. We will add two more specifications.

First, the multifaceted nature of diversity highlights the need for an examination of how diversity and community are experienced, addressed, managed, and embedded into social practices, everyday settings and relations, that is, into the tangible life of social contexts. Therefore we need to integrate general models that capture the dynamics of systems where many variables interact, with *situated research*, which only grasps the subtle entanglement of identity and diversity at the different levels of psychosocial functioning.

Second, though thinking in dichotomies and antinomies is a constant in the history of ideas

across cultures and ages (see Marková, 2003, for a review), the analysis of the community-diversity dialectics may benefit from the use of a reversed pattern, that is, the epistemological, cognitive and cultural frame of *thinking in relations* (Bateson, 1979). With such a shift, community and diversity, diversity and identity, identity and otherness can be understood and addressed not as opposed, essentialised categories, but as the result of a relational process. At the same time, thinking in relations prevents the reductionist tendency to use social categories to reify and crystalize differences between groups (Reicher, 2004).

5. Culture as Sense-making: Symbolic Universes, and Semiotic Capital

Among the different levels of analysis the diversity paradigm calls for, we focus on culture, which obviously plays a significant role in human cognition, values, behaviours, and social relationships. Indeed, culture has much to do with diversity, differences in group status, social norms, support from authorities, laws, and policies. Specifically, we refer here to a specific notion of culture, as elaborated in the Semiotic Cultural Psychology Theory (SCPT), and to some research results drawn from the Re.Cri.Re. project (www.recrire.eu), a 3-year EU-funded research programme.

SCPT conceives of culture as an ongoing process of sense-making. Sense-making consists of processes of interpretation that shape the experience of individuals and social behaviours (Salvatore, 2016; Valsiner, 2007). These processes of interpretation are guided by generalized, affect-laden meanings that are embedded in the cultural milieu and that work as basic assumptions about the inner and outer world, what they are, and how they work. Such systems of affect-laden meanings, named *symbolic universes*, are shared among large groups of individuals. A survey carried out in 2016 within the Re.Cri.Re. project, which analysed the cultural milieus in 11 European countries (Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Spain, and UK)[1], detected five symbolic universes (Salvatore et al., 2018a), each of them corresponding to a basic, embodied, affect-laden generalized worldview, whereby the world is differently experienced as:

- A universe shaped by an inner order (values, principles, rules): not the best of all possible worlds, but a world within which individuals acknowledge the existence of an order that transcends the individuals and engage with it [*ordered universe*].
- The reign of interpersonal bonds, within which individuals feel good, feel at ease, trust each other, and respect rules as long as they share some affective, emotional bond [*interpersonal bond*].
- A society that takes care of the individuals, fulfils their needs, meets their expectations, and enables them to achieve their goals. A world where there is a good functional fit between individuals and society [*caring society*].
- A niche of belongingness: primary bonds and primary groups are valued not per se, but as shields that protect from a hostile, dangerous world [*niche of belongingness*].
- An anomic place to live, where no trust, no sense of agency, no empowerment, no rules are possible [*others' world*].

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[1]The analysis was based on a questionnaire designed for detecting generalized meanings (Ciavolino et al., 2017), global patterns of responses that as long as they intersect different domains of experience are interpretable as markers of generalized, affect-laden meanings.

Symbolic universes provide individuals, groups, institutions, and communities with *semiotic capital* (Salvatore et al., 2018a), that is, a repertoire of meanings, cognitive schemes, values, attitudes, and behavioural scripts, that enable social actors to interiorize the collective dimension of life, namely to experience the notion of a systemic regulative framework as a vital dimension, a concrete fact that affects their ways of thinking and acting.

Two symbolic universes – namely, *ordered universe* and *caring society* – are most likely to convey adaptive forms of semiotic capital. Indeed, both of them are characterized by references to a super-ordered, systemic dimension of life that enables individuals to recognize and value the relation between the individual and the super-individual sphere of experience, with the latter extending beyond personal experiences and primary bonds (i.e., family, relatives, close friends).This type of semiotic capital, which recalls bridging and linking social capital in its intrinsic capacity to connect diverse, heterogeneous groups both horizontally and vertically, as well as establishing new social, information, and resource exchanges (Pelling & High, 2005; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004), promotes engagement with diversity and supports universalistic values.

Conversely, two further symbolic universes, that is, *interpersonal bond* and *niche of belongingness,* are most likely to endow social actors with a partially maladaptive form of semiotic capital. They provide them with meaningful ingroup identities and cohesion, however the we-ness they give rise to is seen either as a protection from diverse outgroups or as a source of affective hedonism. What is felt and experienced as being in common, that is, sharedness, cannot be found outside the boundaries of primary networks and reference groups. This variant of semiotic capital recalls the dynamics of bonding social capital, which typically reinforces exclusive identities and community homogeneity (Putnam, 2000). As a consequence, diversity can only be feared or distanced from, and community experienced as opposed to diversity.

Finally, *others' world* symbolic universe appears as a sort of *semiotic black hole*, which offers no symbolic resources, no cognitive scaffolding, no repertoires of meanings that can help social actors to make sense of the inner and outer world. Therefore, neither community nor diversity can be perceived as meaningful.

The map of the European cultural milieus resulting from the Re.Cri.Re. survey mentioned above, revealed that the largest symbolic universe was *niche of belongingness* (33.71%), followed by *interpersonal bond* (23.98%) and *ordered universe* (22.03%); the smallest ones were *caring society* (10.21%) and *others' world* (10.12%). This scenario highlighted a general shortage of adaptive semiotic capital, since less than one out of four respondents (N=4,753) was associated with either *ordered universe* or *caring society* symbolic universes. In addition, the map also showed that a significant proportion of European citizens – almost a third of the sample attuned with the worldview of *niche of belongingness* – experienced life and society as a threatening and dangerous set of environments and events.

We elaborated on this empirical evidence and argued that the scarcity of semiotic capital cannot but encourage the predominance of local and private logics in the human consortium, and further weaken the already feeble ability of institutions to regulate social life and integrate different interests and identities. Moreover, we reasoned that the form of sense-making characterizing *niche of belongingness* is highly likely to generate a sense of paranoid belonging, whereby identity (i.e., we-ness) develops from external threats. In this way, the perception of otherness and diversity, inevitably perceived as hostile, is placed at the very core of identity (Salvatore et al., 2018b).

Since symbolic universes are embodied in social practices just as identities are entangled in

social relationships, we can now look at their performative effects. To show how they help to explain specific social behaviours and social orientations, we offer two research examples in the domain of political behaviour.

The first is about the outcomes of the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Veltri, Redd, Mannarini & Salvatore, 2018). In mapping the cultural milieus of the UK, we discovered that the regions where 'leave' won were also the regions characterized by the preponderance of the two symbolic universes related to identity/belongingness and endowed with maladaptive semiotic capital (i.e., *interpersonal bond* and *niche of belongingness*). We thus suggested that the decision to leave the EU was fundamentally an acting out of identity, motivated by the need to protect from diversity.

The second example relates to the 2018 Italian elections (Mannarini, Salvatore, & Rochira, 2018). Surveying a representative national sample of voters, we learned that respondents sharing the same symbolic universe were characterized by the same specific pattern of socio-political orientations. We also discovered that support for the populist Five Star Movement was more likely to be offered by those people who belonged to the two symbolic universes characterized by adaptive semiotic capital (*ordered universe* and *caring society*), who also endorsed democracy, shared egalitarian values, and showed a high level of civicness. Through symbolic universes, we were thus able to offer an alternative account of populist support, challenging the thesis that populism appeals mostly to individuals and groups who share authoritarian principles or who lack a systemic view of society.

6. Policy Issues

What does sense-making add to our understanding of the community-diversity relationship and how does it contribute to diversity and inclusion policy? To answer this question we must start by saying that diversity elicits a variety of responses, and that opposition is not the only, inevitable one. While on the one hand it has been pointed out that "our brains are structured in ways that make us alert to difference and threatened by uncertainty" (Jones & Dovidio, 2018, p. 37), we also know that diversity does not necessarily prompt this specific response, and that people and communities can engage with diversity and benefit from it. Many strands of research converge around this conclusion. Acculturation research has showed that individuals in multicultural situations can develop identities that are not at odds with diversity (see section 3.) Intergroup bias studies have found evidence of the ameliorative effects of multiculturalism, as people exposed to cultural diversity become more open-minded, more accepting of differences, and less prejudiced (Tadmor, Hong, Chao, Wiruchnipawan & Wang, 2012). Decades of research on intergroup contact have proved that contact, supported by a favourable normative environment, reduces perceptions of threat, thereby both improving generalized trust and reducing negative attitudes towards diverse groups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

However, we should be aware that how people respond to diversity depends on their general interpretation of society: their symbolic universe, the semiotic resources they are endowed with, and the broader cultural milieu. Indeed, it may be objected that exposure to diversity and contact are likely to generate positive outcomes only provided that the individuals and groups involved have access to the symbolic resources that enable them to acknowledge that they are mutually interdependent and embedded in a superordinate, complex social system. With all the others, contact and exposure to diversity may just increase anxiety and feelings of aversion. Therefore

culture as sense-making can help to account for diversity in response to diversity, and also to detect patterns of response that transcend social groups and categories.

To conclude the reasoning presented in this paper, we will briefly sketch three implications for policy and interventions. First, as researchers and interventionists, we need to acknowledge that fear of diversity is a fundamentally affective response, driven not least by the basic human need for safety and integrity, a need that has to be fulfilled in one way or another. Because of its affective nature, opposition to diversity cannot be countered either with rational arguments or with solutions that are based on the rationalization and minimization of fear. Actions of this kind are not only ineffective, but implicitly convey a moral judgment that labels people who respond with fear as individuals who are unfit to live in diverse societies.

Second, we should incorporate in our practice the notion that human systems – be they individuals, groups, communities, or broader social systems – imply both closure and openness, both identity and diversity, and stop considering one as opposed to the other. Thinking in relations instead of thinking in oppositions is the epistemological premise for addressing sense of community and respect for diversity not as alternative options or separate phenomena, but as a single process, the very same process.

Finally, if we accept that sense-making processes matter, we should find ways to spread and develop adaptive semiotic capital in society. We could pursue this goal by creating or supporting community settings through which people can experience their mutual interdependence. These settings provide opportunities to interact with diverse others, and to interiorize a super-individual order that makes sense. Moreover, we should work at the institutional level so as to plan policies that support and disseminate adaptive semiotic capital. We are referring to policies designed to create normative environments and communities of practice that support and embody universalistic values, seen as concern for the welfare and interests of others.

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