

A post-modernist critique of community psychology

Ian Isemonger

Durban

Community psychology in broad essence is an attempt to re-situate the therapeutic process from the individual to the community at large, therapy addressed to the alienated subject is addressed rather to the alienated community. Implicit in this attempt is the recognition that we cannot uncouple the individual from his/her world, that resources directed at the individual are often misguided treating only the manifestations of some environmental failure. To illustrate this in more concrete terms we might refer to the issue of alienation and delinquency amongst coloured people, in this instance most would endorse the view that efforts directed at individual delinquents do not meet the issue at hand, that the high incidence of alienation and delinquency amongst the coloured people must reflect a shortcoming in the community at large. Although this recognition is a welcome departure from the individualism that has characterized so much of psychology there are consequential intellectual difficulties in shifting this focus from individual to community. One of these is that the concept of community is itself enigmatic there being few objective criteria for the identification of a community. I would like to argue in this article that this is not a worthwhile problem, that if we take the community in the spirit of Anderson (1983) as a mental construct, then we will see this as a resource for the creation of new communities an activity which I will argue is itself therapeutic. I would also like to pursue the idea that the targeting of an existing community for intervention, will in itself lead to the importation into the programme of the ideological and historical precedents to its alienation, and that the more productive means of limiting alienation is the formation of new communities.

I have implied above that there might be some difficulty in providing a definition of the community in which the psychologist would like to intervene. Before rushing into any discussion as to how one could resolve this supposed difficulty it may be more productive to examine just why we see this as a difficulty. My intuition is that it is because we assume that there are objectively existing communities and were we only to have the right method at our disposal we could discover them. More than this however it is because we assume that if we do not discover them our intervention will be the poorer. These assumptions are to my mind fundamentally misguided and serve only to confound intervention effectiveness rather than promote it. Benedict Anderson (1983), in his book "Imagined Communities - Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism" has pursued ideas which are particularly helpful in this respect. In tracing the origins of nationalism one of the issues Anderson finds particularly striking is that members of a nation state will never meet the vast majority of people that constitute that state and yet at the same time will share a strong feeling of unity between them. It is in view of this observation that Anderson talks of the imagined community, the community as a mental construct rather than an objective phenomenon. Whilst we do not want to take Anderson's ideas too naively (although communities can be taken as mental constructs these mental constructs have direct bearing on the form and nature of our objective practice) we should recognize that communities are contingent upon our perception of ourselves. The direction of my argument thus far is that it is misguided to preoccupy oneself with rigorously and objectively defining a community since the nature of the community is in conflict with this endeavour. In the ensuing argument I would like to illustrate why this is not a problem but rather a resource for community psychology.

In a BBC documentary entitled "We are so poor" (1980), part of a series on intervention programmes in debilitated communities called "Wheels of Fire", there is evidence of these ideas at work. The documentary concerns a project in India that was an attempt to empower self-employed women in the informal sector. These self-employed women had been victims of prevailing political and social structures that ignored their needs. One of the most striking features of the video was that the effectiveness of the program seemed largely a function of the emergence of self-employed women as a demarcated and self perceived group. The aggregation of self employed women did not prior to the project constitute a community, the women did not clearly perceive themselves as part of a women's community until they were bound by the SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) organisation. Furthermore it was the emergence of their self perception as a group that was particularly therapeutic in instilling a sense of autonomy and assertiveness in each one of their personal lives, as evidenced in their interaction and bargaining with customers and suppliers. The importance of this observation is that the simple

provision of structures (eg. building, common meeting place, common and explicit agenda, an informed co-ordinator, and criteria for membership) created the members self perception as a functioning community that was in itself therapeutic. In other words the creation of communities in the minds of target individuals should be the essential component of community psychology, rather than a pre-occupation with identifying objective communities into which people fit and then applying therapeutic techniques to them.

What has been suggested above is that a certain degree of creativity in the redistribution of individuals into new communities considerably undermines the alienation and feeling of powerlessness that afflicted those members who were at the receiving end of the former distribution. In the above example an aggregation of self-employed women located in discriminatory households and occupations subsequently became members of a dynamic and pragmatic women's consciousness group. Their redistribution into the new group engendered feelings of autonomy and self assertiveness which they had hitherto not had. I venture this has something to do with the colonisation of power by certain groups or communities that is an ongoing social process. Certain groups for a variety of reasons will assimilate more power for themselves than others, in other words there is a particular distribution of power across the multiplicity of imagined communities in a society or social unit. By changing those communities, by creating new communities with new identities, the foundations for the prevailing distribution of power between communities is undermined and power has to relocate itself. Using the above example power has to relocate itself to accommodate the newly formed community of self employed women.

These ideas on power, communities and alienation raise the second issue I set out to explore and expand upon, that the targeting of an existing community will result in the importation into the intervention programme, of the ideological and historical precedents to its alienation. My point here is that the identity and existence of a group albeit imagined is a function of a range of power relationships (power relationships that are more than likely the source of the communities alienation) with other groups; more simply, there is no identity outside of a power differential. These relationships are historically and ideologically grounded and often well entrenched in practice, thus when we target a community we cannot but help importing all these relationships and associations. The response here might be that this is stating the obvious and that it is precisely these relationships and associations which the community psychologist aspires to break down. I do not want to advance the negative point that operating within existing groups precludes the alteration of the distribution of power across those groups, I would only like to suggest the positive point that it is more productive to actively create new groups with new identities, which will successfully spoil the profile and identity

of the communities that the power distribution assumes. In doing this we curb alienation not so much by empowering a target community as by forcing power to redistribute itself across a different profile of communities.

What are the concrete implications of these ideas in an example such as alienation amongst coloured people referred to in the introduction. One of the first implications is that the intervention would be essentially political. Constitutional and political structures that have enforced and facilitated a profile of communities that is fundamentally racially based would have to change. These structures would have to change in such a way as to actively promote the emergence of new communities along non-racial lines forcing power to redistribute itself along new dimensions. The second implication is that for the most part the intervention will be on a much larger scale, in this case a national level. The final implication I would like to point out, one I regard as important for the success of the intervention and on which psychology is prone to weakness, is that the intervention should emanate from and focus on political not theoretical concerns.

Before concluding there is a conceptual difficulty hidden in my proposal that is worth pursuing. I have proposed in this article that the relocation of power across new and different communities or groups is that process which would curb alienation. Perhaps it would be fairer to say that the relocation of power leads similarly to the relocation of alienation rather than its curbing. I am not sure what exactly one can do with this problem. My assumptions are that alienation is integrally connected to power and that power will always concentrate itself in some communities rather than others. If these assumptions hold then clearly alienation will always relocate itself concomitant with a relocation in power, we cannot get rid of alienation altogether. One may on the other hand choose to question my assumptions, particularly the assumption that power will always consolidate itself in some communities rather than others. If this seems a little optimistic and my assumption is sound then perhaps we can do little more than look to a continuous promotion of the emergence of new communities, in an attempt to destabilize the foundations across which power distributes itself. In this way we at least dissipate alienation and power preventing unhealthy and alarming concentrations in particular groups.

In conclusion the core idea in my argument is that the activity of creating communities in the minds of target individuals is itself a therapeutic process. Once target individuals perceive themselves as members of a new group power is forced to redistribute itself and accommodate the new community, the concomitant effect of this being a reduction in alienation (or the relocation of alienation). This activity also has an advantage in that, by omitting to focus on existing groups with entrenched identities it avoids importing associations that could undermine the effectiveness of an

intervention programme. Consequently we should be more concerned with creating new communities than with objectively defining and treating old ones.

Acknowledgements: My thanks to Grahame Hayes and David Basckin for their criticism and advice.

REFERENCES

Anderson, B (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

BBC (1980) We are so poor". Taken from "Wheels of Fire Series". Directed by J. Stenhouse. Produced by Howard Smith.