



## VIEWPOINTS

# "Together to build a life in common": A solidarity approach to psychoanalytic interventions in the community

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This article is a collective writing of the FEPAL (Federación Psicoanalítica de América Latina) study group *Psychoanalysts in the Community* established in March 2020. The group involves psychoanalysts and psychoanalysts in training who represent psychoanalytic institutions and groups of psychoanalysts from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Colombia and Ecuador. Our extended courses, research and teaching aim at sustaining “solidarity rhythms”, that is, the necessity of empathy and bonding in regard to enjoying meeting with others. We privilege the “voices of the subjects” in different communities, taking into account their feelings, thoughts and theories. In order to build a humanizing development, it is necessary to be present in a stable way, where a significant attachment is lacking.

The first step in the construction of projects is dreaming. In the case of working in the community it is possible to start the transformation of some forms of existence into others that are more promising for the community, the groups, and the subjects.

In this article, we discuss the terms solidarity ethics (i.e. the absence of lies), solidarity bond (i.e. altruism), interdisciplinary work (i.e. different disciplines), solidarity diversity (i.e. the acceptance of heterogeneity), and active listening (to be receptive to the other), as common denominators of many Latin American projects. These terms constitute the framework that favors the completion of subjectivation when it was interrupted or spoiled. The absence of ethics, affectional bonds and receptivity damage psychic and social growth.

## 1. Introduction

The study group Psychoanalysts in the Community has a mission to rethink the processes of subjectivation deployed in society, in its different social nuclei. We try to reconstruct some current problems of subjectivation in relation to themes such as equal opportunities in the project of living, emancipation of thought, the exercise of freedom in the public sphere, respect for those who are different, the creative capacity in the constitution of human relations taking into consideration the various logical perspectives that support the concept of the collective subject.

How will we do to live a life together? The question reveals what humanity lost, or what it could never completely achieve or attain. In the contemporary world, social bonds are increasingly being broken, and our social institutions reflect a culture affected by the logic of the colonial conquerors.

We live in a state of social apartheid, where the common good is not for everyone, where social recognition is a privilege enjoyed by a few and by institutions in which moral and legal functioning are questioned.

Social segregation compromises the whole civilization and destroys the possibility of living together (with-together), or in community (common-unity), imposing an ethics of the singularity over the value of solidarity.

Civilizing processes should allow a link between the experience of social recognition and the relationship of the subject within him/herself, as much on the legal rights. Personal and collective identities of community members depend on primary relationships and the affective bonds among them, which protect them from alienation.

Transforming the segregations and exclusions that are imposed on personal and collective identities requires an understanding of human contradictions, both at an intimate and collective level. This transformation should be oriented towards an emancipating function of various members of the social group.<sup>1</sup>

As a reaction to the loss of the cohesive factors in the relationship with others, Psychoanalysts in the Community proposes an intervention in and with the community. This intervention should involve the respect for the other, recognizing their representations and sensitivities, their rights and ethics, their practices and knowledge.

The Psychoanalysts in the Community work group aims to study, carry out research and share intervention and practices from the psychoanalytic paradigm at an interface with other disciplines. These practices open the possibility to learn about different ways of working in the community in different parts of the world and, at the same time, to strongly sustain our identity as psychoanalysts working in the community. We stand for a democratic decision making and for a constitution of relationships in a horizontal manner. This horizontality allows the integration of diverse practices and fosters an ethics that generates alliances and agreements with different institutional logics.

These principles give us the possibility to recognize the “diversity of voices” in the communities, allowing the analyst involved in this work to be open, and to observe with astonishment and surprise, the emergence of ruptures in his or her theoretical and epistemological assumptions.

## **2. The frame reference of the Psychoanalysts in the Community study group**

According to Sigmund Freud, the creation of a group is facilitated by the possibility of sharing a common object that occupies the place of the ego ideal, an object that could be a person (the leader) or an idea (the concept of nation or the idea of a God). In this scheme described by Freud in “Psychology of the Masses and Analysis of the Ego” (1921), the hierarchical relationship of power and submission operates as a cohesive factor.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of this vertical structure, the Psychoanalysis in the Community group intends to emphasize another type of group constitution: peer relationships based on basic trust. The concept of basic trust does not emerge from the understanding of the vertical relationship with the presence of a leader or the regent who is idealized by a group, but rather from a type of attachment bond that in psychoanalysis has been modeled on the relationship of the mother with her baby.

In this bond, one subject of the dyad captures, via identification, the needs of the other more vulnerable subject, the infant, and responds these basic innate needs of proximity and contact. It is the mother, in an essential sensory-motor “two-way” relationship with the child, that reflects on herself the needs of the infant, who lacks the motor capacities to self-satisfy the desires. In this model, the relationship is based on care and responsiveness without alienating the genuine subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

The support is provided by the mother, who recognizes the needs of the other, gives a sense of security and trust. This allows the baby to acquire the function of empathy, understanding and/or metabolizing, which are fundamental qualities in the bonding process. The identification with the needs of the other allows the development of consonant actions in order to partially calm these needs. This is what generates an empathic process in the bond. In this way, a bond with another, in the community realm, could be built not on the basis of patriarchal models that create a common ideal to which to submit, but rather on the basis of empathic relationships that oppose the ethics of submission and are based on the ethics of solidarity. Under the vertical model, the group submits to a guiding idea that seeks uniformity of its members. In contrast, in the horizontal model, the intention is to give space and recognition for diversity.

The relationships between the various subjects of a group are sustained by a process of dialogue, verbal and non-verbal, of co-creation and respect for the otherness included in the culture of the group. These processes pave the way for the development of solidarity ethics. Solidarity ethics aims to build an action whereby human differences are processed with and within the bonds of trust and loyalty to the other. This presupposition does not imply ignoring or denying the permanent presence of conflict, dissent or destructive effects generated by hatred and hostility, so typical of our social interactions.

The solidarity presence towards others means that our action in the community implies a responsibility for the alter, the similar, the foreigner, the stranger. Psychoanalytic work entails the capacity to register and recognize the emotional needs of the other as an individual or as a social being in order to metabolize them and help in the building of meanings that are emerging and are apprehended in the relationship with the other or with the community.<sup>4</sup>

These solid relationships have been transformed, or rather, deformed in the contemporary times. According to Bauman, we have made a *liquefaction* of our human bonds.<sup>5</sup>

In order to compensate for some of this unraveling of bonds, Psychoanalysts in the Community work towards the recovery of solidarity, for the recognition of the other and towards working “with” the other. The recognition of the other is built from the empathic identification characteristic of the primary maternal bond. However, it is also important to think about recognition with the other, which highlights the mutual nature of the relationship. Working with the other implies an acknowledgment of their presence rather than of their absence.

Psychoanalysts in the Community emphasizes intersubjectivity; desiring with the other implies thinking about this concept from the point of view of being available for the other. Eros was the child of deficit, but also the child of abundance as it can be read in the Greek myth of Poros.<sup>6</sup> This idea could be linked to concept of rêverie.<sup>7</sup>

Desire can be conceptualized not only from loss, but also from the capacity to dream and yearn, not only to return to traces of the past but also to project oneself into the future. This dreaming process involves the inclusion of others. It is a collective daydream.

Faced with the destructiveness that breaks bonds, faced with the absence that creates confrontations and afflictions, it is also imperative to rescue the other pole of the psychic functioning – daydreaming and hope. Dreaming together weaves new ways of existing where anger, exclusions and various discomforts are processed with hope. In our experience, daydreaming leads to containment, accommodation, networks, warm social networks, patient construction in times of encounter/disagreement. It allows us to listen to what the other feels, to redeem the cruelty of life, so that a transformative effect is produced in the relationships that we can hold.

Finding the other, being with the other, dreaming of others, is what allows these relationships of solidarity to be built. The opposite would be the violence of those experiences where the other is not found where and when is needed. This causes a disharmony with the other, the lack of the other, sets a dynamics that breaks down the concept of solidarity, diversity and produces “absences.”

Ailton Krenac, a contemporary Brazilian indigenous philosopher, says that our time and its practices have specialized in “producing absences of meaning of living in society...this generates a great intolerance towards those who are still able to experience the pleasure of being alive, of dancing and singing”.... However, it gives us hope because he says that the world “is full of small constellations of people who dance, sing and make it rain.”<sup>8</sup>

Krenac's ideas could trigger a change of attitude in people who can listen to them in a reflective and sensitive manner. This change will be reflected in a better disposition for being together to build a life together.

### **3. Some thoughts on the concept of solidarity**

"Solidaridad", the Spanish word for "solidarity," could be divided in three parts: "sol" (sun), "y"(and), "dar" (give). How could human beings be like "suns" which give life to the relationship with others... allowing our internal clocks to remind us of the moment in which we become the light for someone who needs!

If the rhythm responsible for keeping the brain and the body in synchrony with the sun is called "circadian rhythm", then the term "solidarity rhythm" could be used to name the need for empathy and bonding that allow us to enjoy the relationship with others.

The solidarity bond becomes a source of integral health, which is why it is chosen by Psychoanalysts in the Community as the goal of our work. Solidarity implies a horizontal work and an exchange with different agents of a community.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, social contacts were interrupted in order to prevent contagion, but different concepts were offered that did not suggest distance as a synonym of health prevention, such as that of community immunity. This concept highlights the idea that immunity is achieved by the closeness and proximity with others. In relation to this, Santiago Levin (Former president of the Argentina Association of Psychiatrists) proposes the concept of "community solidarity". "Vaccines are needed for immunity against the virus, communication is needed for community solidarity". These words remind us that people are, first of all, social beings who create a common field with others where we are represented collectively and individually.

Integration is opposed to the concept of marginality, since social exclusion has the effect of producing a pathos in the individuals who are removed from the center of the social dynamic. The pathos is produced because marginalization implies an absence of economic, legal and psychic resources, which prevents the development of potentialities of marginalized subjects. The social exclusion causes states of lack, and a fracture at the psychological level. This is a dynamic of de-subjectivation that occurs when life is constantly being devaluated.

Renewing social gatherings implies a bond's solidary resignification, which will make visible what marginalization tries to hide. Making it visible will satisfy the universal need for recognition.

The "recognition" that we look for involves acknowledging the diversity of groups that reside in a community. This means that the solidarity work, team work, mutual support, is generated by the active community participation of subjects with diverse characteristics: personality, intelligence, way of learning,

way of communicating, being moved, ways to love. This is the challenge we encounter when “coming into” other cultures in order to understand their codes, values and laws. In this approach, diversity is opposed to those where relationships are based on a specular bond, in which one wants to find in the other the reflection of sameness, thinking only in terms of uniform representations, in a community of equals.

Community work based on solidarity relationships needs to overturn the traditional concept of hierarchical respect grounded in the patriarchal or pyramidal society. It also needs to undo the line that separates the individual from the community in order to emphasize the relationship and the bond with the other. In the solidarity community work, a relational model is proposed to highlight the respect towards those who are different and to embrace diversities.

The Latin origin of the word “solidarity” has its roots in the idea of solidity, the relational quality that brings support and stability. The solidarity bond is like the foundation that creates us, it is the structure that gives a secure base in the relationship with the other.

In the modern age, “solid solidarity” is broken by the turbulence generated by the trend towards individuality. Despite this, the trend towards the collective can counteract the devastating effect of individualistic solipsism referring to everyone saving their own skin. One of the founders of the Quilapayún group and the American Indians tribes, Julio Numhauser, says:

*Un Colihue es muy delgado y muy fácil de quebrar*

A colihue is very thin and very easy to break

*Pero si juntamos varios son difícil de doblar.*

But if we put several together, they are difficult to bend.

*Si se une un campesino, el minero, el pescador,*

If a peasant joins, the miner, the fisherman,

*Todos los trabajadores son un brazo y una voz.*

All workers are an arm and a voice.

Solidarity as a tendency towards solid grouping is opposed to solipsistic individualism, avoiding the danger of binarism. If Narcissus pushes us to an individualistic solipsism, where the other is only the reflection of our sameness, then Eros would be the representation of our community ties.

The erotic element that is present in the community bond adds creativity and change to the notion of solidarity and empathy, with which the ethics of community relations has been highlighted. Byung-Chul Han in his essay “The agony of Eros”, taking some of Breton’s thoughts about the universal force of Eros, states: “Eros manifests itself as a revolutionary aspiration to a completely different way of life and society. In addition, it maintains fidelity to what is to come.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Tovar, solidarity is linked to the process of subjectivation, where the subject needs to be recognized as a human being to be able to experience the emotions and the sense of being thought by others. This is what we call Love.<sup>10</sup>

One beautiful way that prevents us to fall into this dehumanizing dynamic is to think of the idea of a collective construction, the idea of jointly bringing together what could be generated through ideas, actions and writings. The German word *Solidarität* has a connotation of solidarity in which the main idea is to share, to exchange, and to walk together. Solidarity is not an action generated in an emergency situations, it is a right that needs to be accomplished, embedded.

#### **4. Psychoanalytic work in the community**

The collective practices of Psychoanalysts in the Community necessarily imply an interdisciplinary approach both in the theoretical frameworks and in the intervention devices, whether working in schools, hospitals, prisons, street, virtual platforms, or with the victims of natural and social disasters. We cannot be alone; we need the group and we need to work in an interdisciplinary way. Interdisciplinary work is an experience that promotes the humility of knowledge and the richness of the interaction with others in the same community with the primary objective of taking care of the life in common, because we live and grow in bonds. Life is an intertwining with others, where solidarity practices are key for psychic and social development.<sup>11</sup>

To be able to work in the community, courage is required in order to leave narcissisms and ethnocentrisms behind. The interdisciplinary practice is a good device in this respect. Courage, as the opposite of fear, is needed to transform the discomfort generated when leaving the comfort zone, in order to start moving towards the unknown and the unexplored and to question the traditional ways of feeling and thinking.

In the work with others, we should take into account the resistance effect. We should consider, for example, how our conceptual and operative schemes oppose transformation processes.

When working in the community it is also important to consider the feelings of omnipotence and impotence. The practices in the community strongly affect our sensitivity, as they imply going through a range of affects, from frustration and sadness that discourage us in our work, to the maniacal excitement that leads us to *furor curandis*. According to Bions, those who work in the community need to be receptive and concave to new experiences. In any activity with others, and particularly in the community work, there emerges a discomfort associated with overwhelming experiences (for example, natural disasters) or the imminent presence of death and the helplessness it generates (as in hospital work). These experiences may be contained by a reverie function, which helps to process the intolerable, the non-integrated part of the experience.

The reverie process requires an important skill in the analytical repertoire, the polyphonic active listening, which implies receiving what the other feels and thinks, and to hold what is said and what is not said. This practice implies hearing the nuances of silence and the tonalities of noise. A respectful listening that does not interrupt or rush through considerations based on previous theories, it is a listening that finds the theory in the facts and in the words of the speaker. An active listening starts from recognizing the other as a subject, acknowledging his or her autonomy, singularity and collectivity, and not pathologizing those things we cannot metabolize or assimilate.<sup>7</sup>

Active listening is not restricted to a dyad but is open to the group and to the institutional voices. The psychoanalyst is invited to be more participative, accepting different levels of exchange that are not limited to the drive. He or she is to be open to bonds and to the diversity of communicational forms of the collective. The intervention is carried out from a comprehensive interpretation of the context and of the subject in the context, maintaining the idea of neutrality as a position in which one works without prejudice. Active listening requires not only psychoanalytical training in the sense of capturing the unconscious, but also a training to capture the polyphony of meanings involved in working in collective processes. This occurs even when that means for the psychoanalysts to acknowledge their own limitations in understanding the logics of those polyphonies.

Openness to an active listening to the suffering of another person necessarily enables coexistence among humans, but this is insufficient if the subjects do not incorporate their own contradictions and recognize that a stranger dwells within themselves.

We can think of active listening as a way of dealing with the invisibilities experienced by community actors in the face of structural and multidimensional violence that affects them, especially by those who live in the areas of greater social vulnerability. Vulnerability is not a result of the economic variable alone, but also of the quantity and quality of social ties that nurture the experience of living.

Working in the community implies to hold and contain the working team and generate a continual dialogue between the therapists that intervene in the field. The work of Psychoanalysts in the Community has made visible the need for a constant dialogue among colleagues, so that the anxieties that arise in the community interactions are transformed. Otherwise, we risk of falling into the trap of assistentialism and losing creativity, thereby failing to reactivate the inherent power of the subjects involved in these processes.

## **5. How do we approach the subject of solidarity actions?**

Human development would be incomprehensible if we do not place it in a historical and cultural dimension. For example, at the moment, it is necessary to highlight the uncertainty generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Any



collective action that involves bodily approach has the connotation of danger to health. In the current pandemic, coherence in the exercise of authority tends to weaken. This weakness can be redefined as an opportunity to work horizontally and to promote teamwork that allows us to implement community projects.

As has been suggested, one of the aims of Psychoanalysts in the Community is to register and broaden the communication of the community and its agents. The intervention of an analyst is to provide resources that mediate and recognize representations and feelings that otherwise would not be considered.

The analytical work in the community tends to span what we register in an intuitive way. Acknowledging it would allow the development of a preventive work, anticipating possible problems and count on strategies for intervention.

Thus, psychoanalysts need to be retrained so as to be receptive to the emotional elements that circulate in groups and institutions. These can be identified by working with a “social responsibility” thinking, as the target of the intervention is the community.

The communication of the analysts in the community implies selecting the terms with which we will communicate, the tone of voice, the gestures, in a promotion of the care of the other, seeking a balance, a homeostasis rather than an emotional catharsis.

## **6. What do such diverse practices have in common?**

As a conclusion, we will enumerate some premises of the community work and those of the network that are part of Psychoanalysts in the Community:

- Share time, space and objectives with people who are at the same time singulars, socials and collective, just like us.
- Work with a subject with whom states of vulnerability (broadly speaking) are shared. Vulnerability is not only associated with the economic variable, but with an inadequate provision of environmental, psychological and social resources for the processing of vital situations.
- Generate and sustain (as much as possible) the presence in Public Health Policies. Our network teams seek different ways of being present in public policies to disseminate intervention or preventive projects, attending to life care and integral health care. For this purpose, we train with specialists who educate the working group on how to manage these routes.

- Promote interdisciplinary horizontal work while being respectful of the asymmetries in different community projects. Different teams lead projects created *ad hoc* for each situation. The work is managed by working with various community actors horizontally and through democratic practices.

The study group is linked to different levels of FEPAL in order to collaborate in the curriculaum of the training institutes. The aim is to create seminars or extramural curricular spaces in the Psychoanalytic Institutes in theoretical and practical aspects of community interventions, as well as to give greater presence to psychoanalytic institutions within each community.<sup>12</sup>

We promote a way of managing situations of disagreement, adversity, hostilities, where the psychoanalytic vision provides the proper understanding to encourage developments in defense of human rights that are hindered or impeded.

The motto of Psychoanalysts in the Community is that the transit through life is carried out in bonds and exchanges, established by ties with each other that generate transformation and/or development. Our proposal is to work in and with the community in order to transform what was perceived as a “wall into a stepping stone.”<sup>13</sup>

## **7. “A present that hurts and calls for commitment.”**

To conclude, we can return to the initial concern of this paper regarding the segregation that compromises all civilization and the possibility of living together or in community (common-unity). Human displacement in search of survival is a systemic and singular form of social apartheid.

According to the statistics from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2020 worldwide there were approximately 82.4 million forcibly displaced people and 26.4 million refugees, more half were under 18 years. Moreover, there were many stateless people who were denied citizenship and access to basic rights. Today, we add Ukrainian refugees due to the war.

The numbers are overwhelming, but more overwhelming are the lives of people who need to flee as the only way to survive. The threat of death is not a fantasy, but a terrifying reality. Their internal world navigates through emotional states that oscillate between fear and terror.

Subjectivity passes from hell, at least to purgatory. The people try to neutralize the fear-terror with some defensive possibilities. In this context of survival, terror may not end. These people feel constant “absences” (all they lost) in their lives.

Contrary to their needs and expectations to find someone who can help them to work through their vital situation, what they find is emptiness. In the flight, the subjects will try to recreate psychological and social ties that are essential for the construction of “presences”.

As researchers of the subjective and interactional processes of migrants, we are faced with a subjectivity that is in transit and anchored in cruel and violent environments.

The cruel and violent conditions put at risk both personal and family life. At the beginning of the migration process, this reality prevents migrants from building myths/beliefs/ideas that will allow them to dream and to find the necessary hope in order to “live a life worth living”. Eventually, this situation would find the way to hope together with the constructions of myths.<sup>14</sup>

The refugees flee their country to live in another, where they often experience alienation and strangeness. Moreover, to be protected and have resources for their education, health and work in the country of arrival, they are faced with restrictions of their freedom as they cannot leave the host country, which incites further feelings of confinement.

Psychoanalysts involved in the work with migrants need to maintain a sense of continuities of the existence, that is, maintain certain practices that organize mental and social life. This can be done by planning preventive actions such as support and containment groups, gathering information, job searching, rights inherent to all human beings, as stated in the United Nations Convention.

In the work with this vulnerable group, we are faced with traces of social trauma that sometimes generates a set of impenetrable meanings, with convictions and certainties that hold the traumatic condition inside each person. In this sense, repetitive representations of what is “feared” are created and carried to the country of arrival.<sup>15</sup>

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