

Chapter 27

Circles of Culture as a Possible Tool for Community Approach to the Phenomenon of Alcohol and Other Drugs Use



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Introduction

About 275 million people worldwide used drugs at least once in 2016, which is about 5.6% of the world's population aged 15–64, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2018). About 8.4 l of alcohol per capita are consumed per year in the Americas, putting the region second in the world after Europe, where 10.9 l are consumed per year according to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO 2014).

These data show that the use of alcohol and other drugs is a phenomenon that affects a large sector of the population worldwide, having as causes a multiplicity of factors, among which we find: biological, psychological and environmental, according to Stoltenberg (PAHO 2014), being able to measure the profound impact it has on the quality of life of people and their communities.

Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of knowing in which environment it takes place, since this makes possible to understand the use and how it relates to socio-historical realities. In relation to this, Paiva and Costa (2017) emphasize the importance of the issue of drug use as a social and cultural expression, closely linked to the social structure and the context in which they take place, and stress that, although it is a unique practice, it is not a single individual choice, it is developed in relation to the context, the substance and the subject.

In this way we can highlight the need to work together with the actors involved and in their territories, in order to understand and address this phenomenon in each

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D. De Micheli et al. (eds.), *Drugs and Human Behavior*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-62855-0_27

particular context, understanding the particular reality of each group and developing relevant strategies with them.

That is why Latin American Community Psychology can make contributions to address this phenomenon in general and from its methodologies in particular as it implies an approach to these practices and their context, from “their interior”. It is a possible work framework, as Montero (1993) states, as it recognizes the importance of the active and participatory character of people in the community to understand the problems of reality within an economic and social structure, as well as the possibility of transforming their reality.

It is in this sense that the Circles of Culture, proposed by Freire (2004), are tools that we consider extremely valuable, since it makes possible an action-reflection, in the words of Toniolo and Henz (2017), in which knowledge and experiences are interwoven (academic and popular) from a problematic dialogue, to reveal a critical conscience, where new knowledge and possibilities of transformation of their realities emerge. A possibility to “say their word”, words that generate culture, knowledge and life, that say a lot about the reality that is lived by the people of the communities, that made possible new “knowledge” and “doings” for the understanding and the approach to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, while generating a “look and action” from the inside.

In this way, we seek, following Lellis (2015), to be able to approach through the singularity of each situation and work from there the experiences and the understanding of this phenomenon, from its knowledge, its experiences, its links of exchange, so we could build collective and contextualized answers that are viable for each territory.

In summary, the following work will aim to propose, from the Latin American Community Psychology, the Circles of Culture, developed by Freire (2004) as a possible strategy to approach the phenomenon of alcohol and other drugs, in the community approaches. To do so, we will first talk about the relationship between inequality, poverty and Community Psychology in Latin America, which will build the basis of understanding, from where we propose in this opportunity the use of alcohol and other drugs. Next, we will describe the tool: Circles of Culture, its foundation and possible use, so that the proposal of use of alcohol and other drugs in Community Psychology is understood.

Inequality, Poverty and Community Psychology

Use of alcohol and other drugs, as mentioned above, must be thought in context. In our case, we are focusing on Latin America, where our proposal seeks to highlight the importance of building interventions that are close to reality, taking into account, as Ximenes et al. (2015) state, that it is crossed by social, economic and educational inequalities, etc.

In the case of Latin America, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean ([ECLAC] 2019), inequality between 2002 and 2017

decreased in most Latin American countries because income became more egalitarian overall. However, they clarify that the latest measurements of Gini Coefficient show a halt in this process: in 2002–2008 the average annual decline in the index was 1.3%, in 2008–2014 0.8% and in 2014–2017 0.3%.

Inequalities in the different Latin American countries have historical structural characteristics in common, but present different social formations in each place, in each territory, and differ according to historical, economic, political, cultural, geographical reality, etc. This is due to the fact that the mode of production of material life, as Marx (1844/1960) proposes, conditions the process of social and political life.

Within this dynamic, each territory produced a “social surplus”, a surplus that is characterized by new situations of precariousness that lead to “poverty, which is the consequence of an economic policy that combines the production of wealth by the workers and the concentration of income by the owners of the means of production” (Ximenes et al. 2016).

Poverty, as Ximenes et al. (2016) state, is the concrete evidence of social inequalities, since we understand it as the extreme difference in the possibility of access to and distribution of both public and State goods and services, employment, income, among others.

In the case of Latin America, although there was a slight growth in economic development within the capitalist model, this is fragile, since poverty has not yet been eradicated, but rather it is an essential part of sustaining this system (Taaffe 2007), proof of which is that in 2017, according to ECLAC (2019) the number of people living in poverty reached 184 million (30.2% of the population), of which 62 million were in extreme poverty (10.2% of the population), the highest percentage since 2008.

And... Psychology?

For Paredes-Chi and Castillo-Burguete (2018), psychology presented difficulties, for a long time, in dealing with the daily life and development of people in poverty contexts, with the study and deepening of psychosocial processes being unavoidable in order to deal with social inequalities.

It is in this context that Community Psychology emerges in Latin America, with simultaneous processes in several countries: Colombia, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Dominican Republic, Argentina, approximately in the mid-1970s (other psychological practices had already been carried out in the communities). According to Ortiz (2000), it was born as a response to the crisis affecting that branch of psychology, generating “a praxis in function of social reality, aimed at redefining object, method and theory, as well as the very identity of psychologists with the objective of change and social transformation” (Montero 1993, p. 2).

This simultaneity and complementarity can be observed in the theoretical and practical productions in this field, since the developments made by Marx's writings, Borda's militant sociology, Freire's approach to popular education, Berger and Luckman's social constructionism and participatory action research, among others, were shared (Montero 1993), thus giving it a certain shared identity.

The contributions of Martín-Baró (2011) are also highlighted, as he states that the main task of this psychology branch should be to lead individuals and groups in processes of awareness of reality, of de-ideologization, to understand who they are within society, thus showing the active and protagonist character of the people in the community, seeking to recognize and enhance the capabilities, strengths and possibilities, so that they acquire awareness and control over their lives (Ortiz 2000).

We see here the influence of Marx in his double commitment: with the theoretical knowledge and with the political action, in as much as he understands the theory not as pure speculation, but as comprehension of the social practice and its transforming possibility, understanding it as a product of the groups and their communities, derived from the dynamic and dialectic conception of the human being and his social relations (Ortiz 2000).

Therefore, the role of psychologist in this branch will be to accompany the generation of this social change, being a catalyst, a facilitator (Bennett et al. 1966; Montero 1993, 2004, 2006; Murell 1973; Rappaport 1977) that recognizes the knowledge both of his discipline and of the community, thus giving account of the contributions of Paulo Freire's popular education in this field.

For all these reasons, we consider that Latin American Community Psychology is a fertile and necessary field where strategies can be developed to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon in particular, while following Guareschi (2009) (in Ximenes et al. 2016) the ethical conception that supports it is highlighted, as it understands the essential of a clear position faced to popular issues and recognizes the importance of the participation of all people involved in the construction of transforming practices for change, essential requirements for the reading and approach that we propose.

The "Place" of Drugs

According to Paiva and Costa (2017) historically drug consumption is commonly observed in our social reality, giving them different functionalities, depending on the socio-cultural context in which this practice is carried out, so it is not strange that it has awakened the economic interest of capitalist societies, becoming one more product to be commercialized, occupying a place within the market (Souza and Medeiros 2015).

This logic, according to them, also argues that use is an individual choice. This choice is supported by a liberal matrix, where the individual is responsible and master of his choices, successes and failures, trying to make invisible the dialectic relationship he has with his social reality, with his group, with his community, seeking

in turn to obscure the discussion in relation to social inequalities that generate conditions of possibility and determined contexts for the practices of alcohol and other drug use.

It is for that reason that in order to be able to make approaches from this framework it is necessary to remember, as Parajón (2006) raises, that all human being necessarily exists in a time and space, which constitute his inevitable and necessary social-historical, which is essential part of the complex framework of determinations that operate over him, and that at the same time he constructs and reconstructs. Each group, each community, will have its own characteristics of creation and recreation of these practices, and Latin American Community Psychology is a fertile ground to understand them and design ways to approach them, as it understands, according to Montero (1993) that the community is a dynamic social group, which has a common history from which identification processes are developed because they share needs, problems and interests, generating an interactive network in a given space and time, which differs from the larger society without ceasing to belong to it.

We can see then, how this Psychology branch offers us a possibility of work, being able to make possible an understanding of how the plot of that particular group is carried out in relation to the practices of use of alcohol and other drugs. It is about, as Fernández (1989) proposes, to investigate the multiple meanings and no meanings that circulate in that particular group event, looking for with them to produce new collective productions of sense, understanding themselves as groups-subjects according to Fernández and Del Cueto (1985), as long as they can enunciate something, of the context in which they are inserted, to achieve a creative intervention. As Parajón expressed (2006), it is sought to carry out an approach not only from the visible conducts, but also to ask “from the place in which they are carried out”.

In this way, the aim is to take up again the socio-historical reality of each community, of each group that composes it, managing to produce knowledge about what the use of alcohol and other drugs means for them, which can reflect on and question what these practices represent for them, while at the same time generating the possibility of thinking about joint strategies on possible ways of approach, according to their possibilities and limitations, in accordance with what is viable for their territory.

It is for all these reasons that we would like to highlight one aspect, which is to question the extent to which we can only think of it as a merely singular practice. We raise the importance of at least questioning the point of “choice” as the only reason for the use of alcohol and other drugs, thus being able to contemplate other possibilities, to think of other ways of understanding the relationship with it. It is there where we consider pertinent, from this branch of Psychology, to take into account how the conditions of possibility generated by social inequalities and poverty impact on the way these group practices are understood, built and reproduced, according to each particular community.

This is how to build a way of understanding the “place” occupied by the use of alcohol and other drugs in the lives of individuals and communities, taking into

account the social structure in which they are inserted. If we understand that the scenario of social inequalities is a central element in which these practices are gestated and reproduced, Community Psychology has the necessary tools to do so, since it understands that it is in those contexts where we have to be, to insert ourselves in them, to work with them, so that knowledge and understanding is a joint construction and shared with those others, the protagonists of those practices, in order to make reflections and actions that enable adequate strategies for this phenomenon.

A Possible Tool: Circles of Culture

It is because of all the above that we have thought of a proposal that contemplates the active participation of all those involved (people from the community and professionals) and the context in which they are inserted with their social, economic and cultural frameworks as unavoidable elements, following how Ximenes et al. (2016) propose the process of work in the communities from this branch of Psychology.

We would like to clarify that there are several methods in Community Psychology, and in view of this Montero (2006) explains that

Method is not an idol to which offerings must be sacrificed (...) method is the instrument to achieve a goal and that goal is the production of knowledge, which is governed by relations of an epistemological (of knowledge production, of knowledge) and ontological order (that is, according to the nature of the object of knowledge). As said before, method then follows the problem and its object. It is constructed to be able to solve a problem, serving an object (pp. 39–40)

Following these words, we decided to choose this methodology of a participatory nature, as we understand that forms of participation are product of social learning that takes place in specific times and spaces, which must be considered in their determining impact according to Parajón (2006). This makes possible to satisfy our objective as it addresses the socio-historical dimension of users and their communities.

Specifically, we chose the Circles of Culture, created by Freire in 1964, as they contemplate the interweaving of academic and popular knowledge, the problematization and denaturalization of the phenomena that occur in the community while building possible strategies for a particular territory. They were conceived as tools for working in groups, seeking to clarify situations, as well as the search for action itself.

This tool arises in the framework of the “Adult Education Project”, in the Popular Culture Movement of Recife. Freire (2004) proposed the term culture, understood as the result of the work of all men, of their creative and recreational efforts, and thus they rediscover themselves as makers of that cultural world and, therefore, capable of transforming it.

The author in his book “Education as practice for freedom” (Freire 2004) describes the Circles of Culture as an active method that proposes an exercise of critical positioning to people, through group discussion of challenging situations, and on which not only reflection but also action is sought. It clarifies that the themes of debates are thought out on the basis of conversations or interviews with people in the community, which are of their interest, while also using drawings or graphics, which are presented in the form of a dialogue. The aim is to help people overcome their naïve understanding of the world and to develop a critical attitude, and to take an active role *in and with* their reality.

It is necessary to know which is the original method, since from it the necessary modifications will be made for each situation. That is why, following what Freire (2004) proposed in the mentioned book, the phases of elaboration and practice that were developed for this method are described below, in a synthetic way:

- Obtaining the vocabulary universe of the groups with which you will work: this is done through informal meetings with people in the community. The material to be worked on is obtained, as well as the richness of people language. This reveals the way in which they perceive their desires, frustrations, beliefs and hopes.
- Selection of the vocabulary universe studied: the most appropriate generating words will be those that present the greatest phonetic richness of the place, those that present the greatest intensity between what they name and what they represent, and the greatest plurality in the commitment of the word to that social, cultural and political reality.
- Creation of typical existential situations of the group to be worked with: these are coded problem-situations, which challenge the groups, and which include elements that must be decoded by them, with coordinator’s help. They are local themes that open up perspectives for analysing national and regional problems, which make possible to raise awareness.
- Elaboration of cards that help coordinators in their work: they are guides to orientate the people who coordinate.
- Preparation of cards with the decomposition of the phonetic families that correspond to the generating words: what is emphasized here is the importance of agreeing on criteria, in order to carry out the work in the most similar way possible. And for this, the attitude of the coordinators in relation to the dialogue is essential, in order to ensure that a space for learning and not for “domestication” can be built.

In order to exemplify how community approaches are carried out, and the impact they produce, here we have Freire’s words (1989) from his book “The importance of the act of reading”:

Among the many memories I have of the practice of the Culture Circles of St Thomas’ debates, I would now like to refer to one that particularly concerns me. We were visiting a Circle in a small fishing community called Monte Mário. [...] The group of alphabetizers watched the coding in silence. At a certain moment, four of them stood up, as if they had agreed, and went to the wall where the codification was fixed (the village drawing). They

watched the coding closely. Then they went to the window of the room where we were. They looked at the world outside. They looked at each other, eyes alive, almost surprised, and, looking again at the coding, they said: “It is Mount Mario. Mount Mario is like that and we didn’t know it”. Through the coding, those four participants in the Circle “took a distance” from their world and recognized it. In a sense, it was as if they were “emerging” from their world, “coming out” of it, to know it better. (p. 24).

In this way, it is possible to work with the community, based on their own experiences and knowledge, and from there generate processes of action-reflection, which allow decoding the world and being able to “say their word” and then be able to do (Freire 2008). To “say the word”, as the author proposes, should not be the privilege of some, but a basic and fundamental right of all, as we are part of society, we constitute it, we form it and we can modify it (or at least it should be).

But... Why and How Could We Do It?

As the title states, the phenomenon of alcohol and other drug consumption was thought possible to be approached from Latin American Community Psychology in general, and from the Circles of Culture in particular, due to two reasons:

The first is based on the possibility of reading, understanding and approaching the phenomenon from the historical-social point of view, and the second is related to the importance of building a unique approach project according to each particular situation.

With regard to the first reason, as we saw above, the phenomenon of consumption can be thought from a Social Model, as developed by Palm (2006), and necessarily analysed from the macro-social aspects, as proposed by Ronzani (2018), since it is necessary to be able to know the context in which the use is carried out in order to be able to develop effective approaches, taking into account the economic, political, social and cultural characteristics, which are expressed and impacted in a different way in each region or country.

As we mentioned, the conditions that generate social inequalities and poverty are “modelling” forms of socio-cultural expression of this segregation, which can be expressed in the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, so it is not enough to investigate only the drugs themselves, as Paiva and Costa (2017) propose, but also the use and meaning that they represent for them.

That is why from Latin American Community Psychology, contributions can be made while working with people involved, with their ways of reading and understanding the world, with their way of linking, while we are inserted in the territories where these practices are produced and reproduced. We start with the knowledge that they have about their reality, which is a useful tool when it comes to understanding the use of drugs in a given context, as well as being able to think of strategies that are relevant to them.

That is why we propose the workshops of the *Círculo de Cultura*, because from there, instances can be generated, as proposed by Freire (2004), so that the people of the community can carry out processes in which meaning emerges, processes of reflection-action are carried out, in which they are problematized in order to decode the reality in which they are inserted, so that they are capable of questioning those socio-historical conditions in which the use of alcohol and other drugs is configured. And, from there, to elaborate a new text, that contains in itself the other previous texts, producing a new process of awareness that makes possible the transforming action; it is about re-constructing other possibilities of being and doing according to their reality.

The second reason was thought of because of the importance of a unique approach to each particular situation.

In fact, mental health laws of Brazil No. 10,216/2001 (Portaria No. 3,088, 2011) and Argentina No. 25,657/2010 (Ministry of Health of Argentina 2010) (both currently with modifications that do not respect this point) detailed the need for accompaniment and construction of an individual therapeutic project for each person who consumes alcohol and other drugs, in order to generate appropriate conditions for possible improvements, because it respected the uniqueness of each person.

Similarly, making an analogy, we believe that it should be done in the community approaches, because each community has a different plot, so it leads to create appropriate tools for each of them.

That is why we proposed as a possible tool, the Circles of Culture, as it seeks to start from the contextual reality of people, to use dialogue and to adapt to each particular situation. As Toniolo and Henz (2017) state, this has always been Freire's premise, since the method does not impose itself on reality, but rather we must start from each new situation, reinventing it,

the only way anyone can apply, in their context, any of the propositions I made is exactly to remake myself, that is, not to follow me. To follow me, the fundamental thing is not to follow me (Freire and Faundez 2014, p. 41).

In each Culture Circle a new proposal is built for that group, where the premises are analysed and rethought by all the participants being co-authors of the new production, from their contexts, looking for a critical reading of the social, historical, cultural reality, always respecting the logics of each group, in order to be able to better energize the transformation processes.

Thinking about the phenomenon of the use of alcohol and other drugs in particular, we can try, as an example, how they could be put into practice. The people of the community would define the words or initial points (codification), then they would be asked to share their thoughts, meanings, experiences in relation to it (decoding), thus making it possible to listen and analyse together, expanding individual knowledge from a problematic, cooperative dialogue, revealing reality with critical awareness, seeking the collective construction of new knowledge and possible actions (codification) appropriate to their reality.

Final Words

In this chapter we try to explain why the Circles of Culture are a possible strategy for a community approach to the phenomenon of alcohol and other drug consumption, since they aim to generate processes of awareness, understanding this, in the words of Sanders, an American professor who studied Freire in depth, as

the awakening of consciousness', a change of mentality that involves a realistic and correct understanding of one's place in nature and society; the ability to critically analyse its causes and consequences, and to make comparisons with other situations and possibilities; and an effective and transformative action (Sanders 1968, p. 16).

We consider these processes necessary, since UNODC and PAHO data show that the consumption of alcohol and other drugs is a phenomenon that affects a large sector of the world's population, and it is necessary to understand and address it in the socio-historical contexts in which it takes place.

That is why this tool is proposed from Latin American Community Psychology, from practices in the field of health, fully committed to social and political action, which highlights active participation of people in the community throughout the process, aiming to induce the changes considered necessary, to generate possible alternatives and contextualized to this phenomenon.

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