Making sense of ourselves and others: A contribution to the community-diversity debate

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The community-diversity debate in Community Psychology

- Sense of Community: Implications of the SIMILARITY postulate
- An antecedent: Putnam’s (2007) constrict theory
  - Ethnic diversity reduces social cohesion
- CP debate: “Is diversity bad for the community?”
  - The incompatibility argument – Because of its emphasis on similarity, SoC cannot encompass respect for diversity (Neal & Neal, 2014; Townley, Kloos, Green & Franco, 2011)
  - The conditional compatibility argument – Situational factors can make SoC and diversity co-exist (Castellini et al., 2011; Stivala et al., 2016; Mannarini, Talò & Rochira, 2017)

- Issue at stake
  - Re-conceptualizing SoC on the DIVERSITY postulate
Identity research

- Identities are as much a system of exclusion as of inclusion (Duveen, 2001)

- Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 2001):
  - Identity is regulated by processes of accommodation and assimilation of new elements that are encountered by individuals, such as new and alternative cultural perspectives
  - Openness towards alternative views is fundamentally implicated in the construction of identities

- Inputs from acculturation research – Identity in intercultural situations
  - Inclusive, nested identities (Common Ingroup Identity model, Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000)
  - Ambivalent or mismatched identities (Haugen et al., 2018)
  - Oppositional, hierarchical, individualistic identities (Sammut, 2010)

- Re-conceptualizing community: We need diversity to develop attachment to a community
  - Diversity is the default, not the exception
The diversity paradigm

- A multifaceted, situated, and multilevel concept

- These features call for
  - The examination of the ways in which diversity and identity are experienced, managed and incorporated into the *everyday social relations*, into contexts
  - The understanding of identity and diversity *not as opposed and reified categories*: they are not about distinct and fixed differences between cultural and social groups (Howarth & Andreouli, 2016)
  - The incorporation of a *range of levels of analysis* from the most macro-level (culture) to the most micro-level processes (individuals) (Jones & Dovidio, 2018)

Culture has much to do with diversity: differences in group status, normative environment, support from authorities, laws and policies
Culture as sensemaking

- Culture as an ongoing process of sensemaking (Valsiner, 2007; Salvatore, 2016)
  - **Symbolic universes:** Affective-laden, generalized meanings enveloping the entire field of experience, basic assumptions on the outside world and our relationship with it

- Re.Cri.Re. project – A map of symbolic universes in Europe (Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Spain, UK)
  
  **Ordered universe:** generalized positive attitude towards institutions, services (and the future), perceived as trustworthy, identification with transcendent values (e.g., justice, solidarity, etc.), and commitment
  
  **Interpersonal bond:** positive, optimistic vision of the world, reduced to realm on the interpersonal, affective bonds
  
  **Caring society:** vision of society and institutions as responsive to individual needs. Belief in the possibility to pursue personal purposes via a supporting system
  
  **Niche of belongingness:** anchorage to primary networks, combined with a negative connotation of the outside world (pessimism, fatalism, distrust). Primary networks as shelter from an anomic, threatening environment
  
  **Others’ world:** a negative, desperate vision of the world (generalized distrust, hopelessness, lack of agency, anomy)
Semiotic capital

- Symbolic universes provide individuals and groups with semiotic capital: A set of meanings, schemes, values, attitudes, behavioral scripts, etc. that enable people to interiorize the superindividual dimension of life (being embedded in and interdependent with others)

- **Ordered universe** and **Caring society**:  
  - Both acknowledge and value the relation between the individual and the superindividual sphere that extends beyond family and close friends  
  - Bridging and linking capital: engagement with diversity, universalistic values (adaptive semiotic capital)

- **Interpersonal bond** and **Niche of belongingness**:  
  - The superindividual sphere is experienced only within groups and primary networks, felt as source of ingroup identity and cohesion  
  - Bonding capital: fear or distancing from diversity, community as opposed to diversity (maladaptive semiotic capital)

- **Others’ world**  
  - A semiotic black hole that offers no symbolic resources  
  - No semiotic capital: neither sharedness nor diversity
Distribution of symbolic universes in Europe (N=4,753)

- **Shortage of adaptive semiotic capital**
  Less than one out of four respondents was associated with ‘ordered universe’ or ‘caring society’

- **Paranoid belonging**
  A significant proportion of European citizens perceived the external world as full of threats. This form of sensemaking generates a paranoid form of belonging, whereby identity develops from the external threats
Symbolic universes and social behaviour

- **European sample** (N=4,573) – Openness to foreigners characterized the ‘virtuous’ universes (OU e CS), closure characterized NB and OW (IB is half way)

- **Italian sample** (N=1,200) – Individuals sharing the same symbolic universes were characterized by specific patterns of socio-political orientations (Mannarini, Salvatore, & Rochira, 2018)
  - OU and CS were associated with high support for democracy, high civicness, and high respect for diversity (NB and OW show a reversed pattern)

- **UK sample** – The Brexit referendum: The UK regions within which the “leave” vote was the majority, were the regions with the highest presence of the two symbolic universes related to identity/belongingness (Veltri, Salvatore, Mannarini, & Redd, 2018)
Policy issues – Is opposition to diversity inevitable?

- **Yes.** Research shows that our brains are structured in ways that make us alert to difference/diversity and threatened by uncertainty (Jones & Dovidio, 2018)

- **No.** We know from acculturation and intergroup contact research that diversity does not necessarily elicit these responses

  - Integrating culture in explanations: it may be objected that exposure to diversity and contact only work among individuals and groups who share adaptive semiotic capital (or live in normative environments that promote it), while among all the others contact and exposure to diversity may just increase anxiety and feelings of aversion
Policy issues – Handling fear, supporting semiotic capital

- **The right of fear**
  Acknowledge and hold the fear of people without minimizing it or offering solutions based on rationalizations

- **Community through diversity**
  Human systems need both closure and openness, identity and diversity. One is not opposed to the other

- **Semiotic resources for democratic societies**
  - Support or create community settings that make people experience (and interiorize) their mutual interdependence and their communal belonging while also experiencing their own and other’s diversity
  - Contribute to plan and implement policies that are culture sensitive and that support adaptive semiotic capital, i.e., create normative environments and communities of practices that embody universalistic values
Thank you

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