Use and Abuse of the Term “Psychosocial” in the Field of Social Intervention

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ABSTRACT

Applied to theory, research, and intervention, the term “psychosocial” is defined as an approach characterized by the relationships of interdependence and mutual influence between the various levels of reality in which daily life takes place. This idea began to take its first steps with the events that gave rise to the social sciences, psychology among them. Applied to social intervention, the psychosocial perspective is based on a simple premise: psychology is legitimized as an instrument to serve human well-being, both in its personal and collective dimension. It recognizes the constructed nature of reality and the social order, with the purpose of trying to change it when it leaves psychological damage and social destruction in its wake, using the social scenarios (community, group) as the agent and objective of change.

Uso y Abuso del Término “Psicosocial” en el Campo de la Intervención Social

RESUMEN

Aplicado a la teoría, a la investigación y a la intervención, el término psicosocial se define como un enfoque caracterizado por las relaciones de interdependencia y mutua influencia entre los diversos niveles de la realidad en la que discurre la vida cotidiana. Esta idea empezó a dar sus primeros pasos a partir de los acontecimientos que dieron lugar a las ciencias sociales, la psicología entre ellas. Aplicada a la intervención social, la perspectiva psicosocial parte de una sencilla premisa: la psicología se legitima como un instrumento al servicio del bienestar humano, tanto en su dimensión personal como colectiva y a continuación, asume la naturaleza construida de la realidad y del orden social con el propósito de intentar cambiarlo cuando vaya dejando a su paso daño psicológico y destrucción social sirviéndose para ello de los escenarios sociales (comunidad, grupo) como agente y objetivo del cambio.
In a recent interview Santiago Boira and María Fuster (2022), technical secretary and member, respectively, of the Division of Psychology and Social Intervention (IPSoc), of the General Council of the Spanish Psychological Association, express their concern about the “indiscriminate use” of the term “psychosocial”. In a similar way (use that is equivocal, generalistic, abusive, and inappropriate), the General Council of the Spanish Psychological Association (2016, p. 183) has already pronounced itself. The argumentative thread of the interview, for example, starts from a critical assumption: there are professional authorities who deal with a matter that is unfamiliar with this terminology and its theoretical bases participate, promote recommendations and good practice guidelines that lack the necessary rigor in the use of the term “psychosocial”, which can lead to malpractice with the consequent harm to highly vulnerable populations. The debate is therefore already underway, and these pages only intend to make a modest contribution, limited, of course, to the theoretical connotations of the term “psychosocial” regardless of the use that may be given to it by different actors in their professional work.

A Brief Tour of the Genesis of the Psychosocial Approach

Let us start with the most obvious: “psychosocial” is much more than a simple word. It is a term supported by more than a hundred years of history and by an epistemology, which, in its meaning, adopts a particular characteristic approached by the interplay of mutual influences between the levels at which the actions carried out by individuals and groups in the scenarios of that supreme power take place. It is the realm in which all the people who make up the collective of that time (Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in the reality in which everyday life takes place. It is the realm in which, incidentally, social intervention programs are usually developed: the family, the neighborhood, the educational or work environments, places of leisure and recreation, etc. All these contexts are presented to us, both authors add, as ordered, shared realities filled with meanings and functions (see Berger & Luckmann, 1968, pp. 36-46), derogatory and harmful to many occasions, and followed sometimes by actions of the same kind simply because of the group or category to which some persons belong. And for these same reasons, all these scenarios sometimes demand that we take part in the issues that occur in their midst. And for these same reasons, all these scenarios sometimes demand that we take part in the issues that occur in their midst, and followed sometimes by actions of the same kind, the arguments for social intervention:

1. Rather than interaction, the psychosocial approach focuses on the group as the object of study. The individual does not exist in isolation; the group has always been a fundamental reality of human social interaction. Outside this framework, humanity is lacking, according to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in the reality in which everyday life takes place. It is the realm in which all the people who make up the collective of that time (Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann) are part of the same community.

2. Some of the most renowned theorists in this field of knowledge have left behind a psychologically devastating legacy that has been a step forward on the basis of the following two premises: a) the person concerned in isolation is pure abstraction, a mere entity; b) as a psychological entity, the person only acquires real existence within a community, a group, or in a society in which he or she is or becomes an interactive unit. Outside this framework, humanity is lacking, according to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, in the reality in which everyday life takes place. It is the realm in which all the people who make up the collective of that time (Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann) are part of the same community.

3. The social structure that has placed millions of people in situations of extreme vulnerability through decisions taken, or not taken, in the political, social, and economic spheres.

4. Culture, the world of shared meanings and patterns of action that defines the relationships between groups and social categories, has been defined as “the union of the biological, moral, or social superiorities of some over others (ethnocentrism).”

Beyond Individuals in Interaction

This very brief overview of what could be considered the foundational steps and moments of psychosocial thinking provides some arguments for social intervention:

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2. None of these realities was in its origin and is in course inevitable, but rather they were the fruit of human action and, as such, open to change.

3. It is within these realities that shared ways of thinking, feeling, and acting originate, which are very often imposed by others, and, as such, open to change.

4. Some of them leave behind a psychologically devastating and sometimes impermeable trace that does not just affect individuals but whole groups at times.
The problem with individualism lies in its insistance on the identity of the individual what is often found only in the collective, or in referring to individuality what is only produced in the dialectic of interpersonal relationships. In this way, the practice of the relationships of the environments that are generated and reinforced by the existing structures by ignoring the reality of the social structures and reducing structural problems to personal problems (Lewin, 1951). The central idea of the psychosocial was thus outlined more than a hundred years ago: the person and the actions he/she performs, both at the individual and collective level, and the consequences of the social theory and intervention, enriched this central idea on the basis of the following two premises: the first, already mentioned, reducing structural problems to personal problems” (Putnam, 2000, p. 9). The other side of the coin is the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study (Putnam, 2000), initiated in June 1930 and early 1940s with a group of 253 adolescents (average age 10.5 years) living in these two areas near Boston, with an equivalent number in the control group. The design left nothing to chance: social workers visited each of the families twice a month for five years, and, to top it off, about 100 received medical or psychiatric care.

The program ended in 1945, and thirty years later the results could not have been more encouraging: there was higher in the intervention group than in the control group (see details in McCord, 1987). This was a program aimed at training, peer mentoring, etc.) and methodologies to evaluate the effectiveness of the activities implemented. The criteria for the effectiveness of social intervention programs can be varied, but it is conceivable that all of them should converge in the presence of some positive impact for the individuals, groups, or the community. The psychosocial approach acquires special relevance. Among them are the autonomous social services legislation. In addition to the reasons and examples pointed out by Lewin, we must add some others of equal importance. From different lines of research, it is suggested that the low level of citizen activity is related to low levels of life satisfaction and a decrease in life expectancy. The best known line of research is probably the one carried out by Robert Putnam on social capital and the consequences of its decline. It is also the most ambitious because it analyzes not only the beneficial effect of social networks and affective ties (family, community, friends), civic associations, and neighborhood groups on people’s well-being, but also the effect on the democratic climate. For the purposes of this article, the following proof is worthwhile: “...all of the domains I have traced the consequences of social capital in none is the importance of social connectedness so well established as in the case of health and well-being” (Putnam, 2000, p. 9).

Participation as a Strategic Mediator

Nowadays, participation is a community accepted and used strategy to build durable and effective solutions to chronic problems, to develop autonomous social services legislation. In addition to the reasons and examples pointed out by Lewin, we must add some others of equal importance. From different lines of research, it is suggested that the low level of citizen activity is related to low levels of life satisfaction and a decrease in life expectancy. The best known line of research is probably the one carried out by Robert Putnam on social capital and the consequences of its decline. It is also the most ambitious because it analyzes not only the beneficial effect of social networks and affective ties (family, community, friends), civic associations, and neighborhood groups on people’s well-being, but also the effect on the democratic climate. For the purposes of this article, the following proof is worthwhile: “...all of the domains I have traced the consequences of social capital in none is the importance of social connectedness so well established as in the case of health and well-being” (Putnam, 2000, p. 9).

It might be expected that individuals in isolation would be more amenable than groups of like-minded individuals. However, experience in leadership training, in changing of shared activities, work, production, criminality, alcoholism, prejudice, all seem to indicate that it is usually easier to change individuals fired into a group that to change any of them separately” (Lewin, 1951, p. 228).

Faced with the passivity of an auditorium, their uncertain commitment, and the need for a decision based on an individual strategy of change, the group discussion (participation) introduces an additional force to “break the habit”, bringing the normal resistance that we see when we begin to reflect on the changes that must go about our daily lives, and makes it possible to make a decision in the proposed direction based on the implicit presence of a group norm. To put it simply but effectively, the group is the main driver of change, the main engine of social change becomes its main ally. Since the pioneering studies by Triplet (1898), one hundred and twenty-five years of research support this assertion.

It was on these premises the tendency towards the broadening of the object, the response to practical problems as the first step in the development of social services, the group as an agent of change, and participation as its main axis) that the change of paradigm in the field of social intervention was based. Urie Bronfenbrenner’s well-known ecological theory enriched them, but the author himself never forgot their origins: this work can be seen as an attempt to provide psychological and sociological substance to Lewin’s brilliantly conceived but limited concept of change, and to transcend the systemic approach to social problems. The debt to the German master is also evident in the first four definitions of the ecological orientation and, above all, in Proposition A: “in ecological research, the researcher and the problem that the researcher observes are part of the ecological process” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 41). Italic added).

5 In the Spanish edition (Paidós, 1987, p. 60), there is a serious error in the translation of this proposition. The original proposition stated that the researcher was a “autónomo” attributed to the processes that take place within environmental settings. This translation completely changes the original proposition of the author and his theory.
invoking one of the founding postulates of social thought: the most urgent, the most psychologically harmful and socially destructive problems we face "are problems we have made for ourselves... whose origin is in our behavior and our social institutions" (Miller, 1969, p. 1603). It is up to psychology, as a science at the service of human well-being, he adds, to lead the search for new and better personal and social scenarios.

The Axes of Well-Being in the Field of Social Intervention

In the field of social intervention, well-being would be defined as a priority around three axes. The first of these is framed within personal empowerment, an objective that is pursued through the promotion of active living habits to prevent isolation and loneliness in the elderly, training in social skills and assertiveness strategies, and decision making in motion personal resources while making us aware of our own limitations, defining goals, and indicating the way to achieve them. They enable you to manage with solvency part of the environment (interpersonal or professional) in which our daily life develops and help us to achieve the feeling of personal growth. All these experiences are part of psychological well-being (Díaz et al., 2006).

However, regarding personal empowerment, we should avoid a frequent misunderstanding: the acquisition of skills and competencies for the achievement of the objectives sought in any social context depends not only on the motivation, interest, or skills of the people concerned, but also, and sometimes to a large extent, on the opportunities provided to them in order to achieve them. The social, political, and economic conditions and the decisions taken, or not taken, in those environments play a decisive role. In the social, political, and economic conditions and the decisions taken, or not taken, in those environments play a decisive role. In the contemporary society, a large proportion of the population, regardless of their age, gender, or social status, is faced with situations of disadvantage and inequality, which result in individual or social distress, such as poverty, stress, or alienation. These situations are particularly harmful to children and young people, who are most vulnerable to the negative impact of social inequality and discrimination. In this context, it is important to recognize the importance of social interventions that aim to promote personal and social well-being, and to address the root causes of social inequality and discrimination.

The second axis occurs within the framework of community empowerment through, for example, community coalitions to prevent alcohol consumption among the adolescent population, programs aimed at promoting community engagement, facilitating the participation of community members in decision making about community issues, and promoting the development of community resources to deal with the damage caused by a natural catastrophe, the recovery of damaged social networks after prolonged events of political violence. Community empowerment facilitates social integration and a sense of belonging, generates trust in others and institutions, and favors involvement in issues or problems that affect the common good. All of this is what defines social well-being (Blanco & Díaz, 2005).

The third axis enters a powerful space from the psychological point of view, of the social context of the life of the elderly, training in social skills and assertiveness strategies, and decision making in motion personal resources while making us aware of our own limitations, defining goals, and indicating the way to achieve them. They enable you to manage with solvency part of the environment (interpersonal or professional) in which our daily life develops and help us to achieve the feeling of personal growth. All these experiences are part of psychological well-being (Díaz et al., 2006).

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aspecífic: "social psychological can and must include among its theoretical and research preoccupations a direct concern with the relationship between human psychological functioning and the large social processes and events which shape this functioning and are shaped by it [...]. In view of all this, my belief in a "value-free" social psychology rapidly grew shaky" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 7).

All this, in a very summarized way, to conclude that, more than a territory, an objective, or a particular context, the psychosocial is a perspective from which we analyze social events and problems, the actions that are at their origin, and the consequences that they entail, in the usual and normal level, in the conviction that all this is the result of the conscious and intentional activity of the human being. If this is so, it could be concluded that everything that has been conceived and created in a certain way and in a certain direction can be changed, and should be changed when it leaves in its wake a task of psychological, social, and moral damage for which there is no place for indifference or neutrality. The psychosocial approach to intervention bases itself, as a priority, on the group-community as the agent, scenario, and objective of change.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

References


