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Towards a social psychology of community: a social representations perspective

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Communities impinge into people's lives: they orient the social construction of knowledge; they ground the negotiation of common identities; they marginalise and stigmatise certain social groups; they provide the tools for empowerment and social inclusion. For these reasons, I argue that communities are central to the social psychology of humankind. They have not, to date, been given the attention they deserve in the academic discipline of social psychology. A short account of the history of this discipline demonstrates that need for a paradigmatic shift and for a dialectical approach to community. I suggest that the theory of social representations offers the tools to explore the concept of community as a source of social knowledge, as a basis of common identities, and as a means in marginalisation and social exclusion. This reveals the potential of social representations to construct, delimit and empower the everyday experience of community, highlighting the status of 'community' as a social creation that has acquired reality.

Communities, social representations, social psychology, identities, social exclusion, empowerment.

If one attends to the social world in which we live one is likely to acknowledge that communities are highly contested social phenomena. We argue over them, we claim the right to speak for them, we reject them, we shed blood over them. Community conflicts make up the terrain of the assertion of identity, meaning, value and loyalty in our local-global age. Most often we find that *community* is not a latent, abstract concept; instead, we find *communities* that give our daily practices, our political differences and our understanding of ourselves significance. If social psychologists are to understand these conflicts they need to engage with "the changing social patterns of our times", as Bruner (1996, p. vi) has advocated. We must, that is, explore the psychological significance of communities.

Community, as a concept, is problematic in both everyday discourses and in academic research. The social problems we live, witness and research, such as conflict, social exclusion, poverty, unemployment, discrimination, addiction, homelessness, crime, mental illness, all relate to various aspects of community life. Applied psychologists and community psychologists are aware of this, and yet, social psychologists have still to address the issue of community adequately. What I hope to demonstrate in this paper is that the social psychological significance of community deserves our attention. Hence we need to explore how community is conceptualised and experienced in the everyday.

1. Theorising Community

Community presents the social psychologist with an interesting paradox: community is a salient part of our everyday lives, and yet, its existence is highly contested. We can all agree on the importance of community, but not on its precise significance. We can all

discuss the communities to which we belong, and yet be unable to map out where they begin and end. We can be sure that we are different from 'other' communities but, when pushed, have to admit that we share commonalties. Thus, within everyday discourse, at least, community is at once taken-for-granted and highly debated. Consider some common definitions of community:

Table 1 here

None of these seem entirely adequate; none encompass all what we mean when we speak of 'community'. Different definitions of communities emphasise different issues.

In some definitions communities are located; in others membership is more symbolic. In still others communities are brought together through common experiences; others are divided by internal differences. As these definitions can sometimes conflict, in everyday discourses the meaning of 'community' is often contested[1].

Similarly in academic discourses, clear definitions of 'community' are rare. There is a vast literature on community that is associated with many disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology, media studies, cultural studies, political thought, history, theology, literature, philosophy and social policy. Despite, or perhaps because of, the extensiveness of material on 'the community' there seems to be little agreement on what community actually means. There is indeed a "bewildering variety of meanings associated with the term 'community'" (Crow and Allan, 1994, p.1). After reviewing 94 definitions of community, Hillery (1955), for example, concluded that "there is no complete agreement as to the nature of community" (p.119). More than forty years on, the different meanings of community are no less ambiguous.

I shall use 'community' to refer to the way communities are talked about, constructed, and defended by those who reside in them and come into contact with them. This means that rather than pretending that a 'real' or 'natural' essence of community can be so discovered, I am taking the question to be how representations, practices and relations of power both construct and restrict the social construction of communities. The way we represent 'community', the different meanings that communities embody, the symbolic

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[1] Throughout the paper I stress the socially constructed nature of 'community'. For the most part, I would ask readers to bear this is mind. When it is essential that my social constructionist approach be emphasised I have used parentheses to remind readers that there is no agreed objectivity to 'community', and what meanings we give it are negotiated, contested and altered as we make it significant in our everyday lives.

and the material consequences of different constructions of communities all need rigorous analysis. There are many questions to ask: How important is community in our day-to-day lives? Do different meanings of the same community co-exist? Do we all understand the same thing by 'the gay community', for example? Can we use expressions like 'the black community' meaningfully? What are the consequences of competing versions of the same community? And, primarily, is 'community' a relevant concept in today's world?

The Contemporary Significance of 'Community'

Community, one might assume, is an outdated notion: one that fits better in more traditional, more stable and more collectivist societies (Puddifoot, 1995). Cultural, political and geographical changes in the modern world have increased the salience of individualism, and thus many agree that "there is no longer any such thing as society" (Thatcher, quoted in Raban, 1989). As we become more and more immune to the bloodshed of community conflicts, such as those in Ireland, Indonesia, Bosnia and Rwanda, the very concept of community seems less and less significant to the changing demography of the modern world (Cooke, 1989). Nancy (1991), for example, asserts that the "gravest and the most painful testimony of the modern world, which possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer, ... is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, to the conflagration of community" (p.1). Considering this, is it not a bit late in the day, and a bit irrelevant, to be considering a social psychology of community?

Many community theorists have indeed proclaimed the 'eclipse' or 'end' of community (e.g. Stein, 1972). Urbanisation, migration, globalisation, new medias and technologies have dissolved the significance of place in the late modern world, and so too threaten the physical geography of community (Meyrowitz, 1986). Crow and Allan (1994) have found that "in modern society it is rare for the boundaries of place to coincide neatly with the sense of community which people hold" (p.xvi). Because of the supposed "territorial basis" of community (Suttles, 1972, p.234), some theorists have suggested that community, too, is "lost" (e.g. Stein, 1972; Nisbet, 1967). Also the assumed correlation between 'rural' and 'communal' has meant that communities are often represented as face-to-face, traditional and conservative. Urban areas are seen to be more modern, more 'civilised', and more complex (e.g. Park, 1925). Thus increased urbanisation has led many to assume that contemporary society is less communal. Instead social theorists have described the increasingly plural and divided nature of society "on a culturally hybrid globe" (Werbner and Modood, 1997, p.4).

However, it could be suggested, for these very same reasons, communities are equally important today. Crow and Allan (1994) have pointed out that "despite the repeated pronouncements of its inevitable decline in the modern world, community life is still very much a part of our social existence" (p.xxi). Communities today may be under threat, this is obvious. But this gives them more, not less, significance in our understanding of others, of our own societies, and, crucially, of our selves (Morley and Robins, 1995). Indeed, Bauman has depicted late modernity as "the age of the community": "of the lust for community, the search for community, the invention of community, imagining community" (Bauman, 1991, p.246). Politicians from both sides of the political spectrum hail "community" as a cure for all perceived social ills from

rising crime and single parenting to racist attacks and social exclusion. Community education and classes in citizenship are being woven into the National Curriculum across Britain. In both political and academic discourses the importance of community is increasingly unquestioned.

Why a *Social Psychology* of Community?

The study of community is a new field for social psychology (for insightful recent studies see Jodelet, 1991, Moodie *et al,* 1997 and Puddifoot, 1995). It is not, though, new for the social sciences. The study of community is well documented in many disciplines, such as sociology (e.g., Back, 1996, and Crow and Allen, 1994), social anthropology (e.g., Baumann, 1996, and Cohen, 1989, 1995) and political theory (e.g., Tinder, 1980, and Kamenka, 1982). As these social researchers have produced insightful texts on community, is there really a need for a social psychology of community? It is precisely the question of how communities become meaningful for the individual that is, I suggest, especially important to answer. One of the key problems of psychology is the study of the social self, and how it creates, defends and challenges representations of community: how it is that, in and through representations of communities, we create both a common identity and a located self.

What makes social psychology distinct from its parent disciplines - psychology, sociology and anthropology - is its focus on the dialectic between sociological and psychological phenomena (Brown, 1965). The cross-roads between intersubjectivity and subjectivity, between the public and the private, between the 'we' and the 'I', are at the heart of a rigorously *social* psychology. Social psychologists examine the conflict between the individual and society, the tensions and attractions, the bridges and the

barriers between individuals and the outside world. Community is a stage on which much of this drama occurs. It is where individuals "learn and continue to practice to be social" (Cohen, 1995, p.15). How we develop and maintain roots that connect us intimately with others, and yet, through these connections, also develop difference and uniqueness, therefore, is pivotal both to the study of social psychology and to the study of community.

One of social psychology's key contributions to knowledge has been the explication of the vulnerability, dependence and, indeed, impossibility of the existence of the lone individual. In her many branches, social psychology teaches us that culture is deeply constitutive of the individual. Theories of self-consciousness (Mead, 1972), identity (Tajfel, 1982), language (Vygotsky, 1978), thought (Piaget, 1968), attributions (Heider, 1958), impressions (Ichhesier, 1949), roles (Goffman, 1971), attitudes (Lalljee *et al*, 1984), social representations (Moscovici, 1984), discourses (Wetherell and Potter, 1992) and ideologies (Billig, 1991) all agree on this: the individual is, in essence, a social being. What this suggests is that we cannot *but* live in communities: we need to be in and of communities in order to realise a distinct sense of self, attachment, individuality and commonality.

In affirming the intrinsically social nature of self, a social psychology of community would extend social psychology as a discipline. However, such a psychology would do more than simply echo established insights of the discipline. In engaging with the lived realities of communities, a social psychology of community would provide a much needed focus on 'the lived'. In taking our theories into applied settings we can develop

a social psychology better equipped to understand, critique and challenge the realities which we collaboratively construct.

Social Psychology: The Absence of Community

Communities integrate individuals into society. Communities connect personal histories, individual loyalties and private attachments, as well as embody cultural practices, shared meanings and common values. Communities provide the basis for many of the cultural aspects of social psychological phenomena - shared knowledge, common practices and collective identities, as well as allowing for differences, individuality and agency. As such, one could be forgiven for assuming that community is a well-researched and theorised concept within social psychology.

The answer as to why social psychology has yet to theorise community adequately lies in its history. Farr's accounts of the history of social psychology detail what Graumann has called "the individualisation of the social" (1986; see Farr, 1978, 1991, 1996). Ever since F. H. Allport (1924) defined "psychology in all its branches" as "a science of the individual" (p.4), investigation in social psychology has shifted to the lone individual. A consequence of this has been the editing out of sociological forms of social psychology, such as Mead's social behaviourism (1934), Blumer's symbolic interactionism (1969), Thomas and Znaniecki's social attitudes (1918-20) and Ichheiser's study of interpersonal relations (1949). It is not surprising, then, that such an individualistic psychology has not, and indeed, in this form, cannot, engage in studies of community.

A history of social psychology reveals how the paradigmatic roots of social psychology, which run back to Descartes, have restricted the study of the social or the

intersubjective. Farr (1987) has described how psychology was born in the context of Cartesian dualisms of mind versus body, self versus other and individual versus society. Descartes' glorification of the I and his conviction that "the I that is the starting point of knowledge and certainty" (Marková, 1982, p.16) have diminished the scope of the discipline. Here mind is conceived as separate not only from body, but also from its material and social world. Within this paradigm it is difficult to grasp the essentially social nature of mind and of self. Dewey pointed this out over a century ago, in 1899, in saying that social psychology ignored the context of culture and ideology and their effects on interactions (quoted in Hilgard, 1977). Morris (1996) has made a similar point:

> "Beginning from the assumption of the existence and reality of the individual, who then, and only then, forges links between herself and other separate and discrete individuals, it becomes all but impossible to conceive of any sort of community at all" (p.226).

Cartesian social psychology has plucked the very subject of social psychology, the social self, from her inter-relations within a society of others, un-coupled the inter-dependent dialectics of self, and so reified an isolated, detached and thus incomplete self. As such, this discipline has paid "little attention to the study of the environment, its culture, and its institutions" (Himmelweit, 1990, p.18). Our Cartesian legacy has resulted in a social psychology without the networks of 'others' to which we sometimes belong - communities, nations, cultures. And thus, at present, we have a social psychology struggling to contribute to an understanding of many of the practical realities of the world in which we live: bloody clashes of community identities and the celebrations of community diversity unfolding around the globe.

What is a community?

For the social psychologist there are at least four aspects of community to address:

1. Community as a source of social knowledge

2. Community as a basis of common identities

3. Community as a means of marginalisation and social exclusion

4. Community as a resource for empowerment

The question arises as to how these aspects could be grasped theoretically. Rather than choosing from specific social psychological theories I suggest that we focus on an approach that highlights the dialectics between self and society. We need, that is, to turn to Hegelian logic (Marková, 1982). Hegel's conception of dialectics allowed that contradictions are sublated or re-united in a synthesis that involves a process of qualitative transformation. This means that it is necessary to think of self/other and individual/community as contradictory units working towards transcendence, rather than as oppositions. This framework allows for a relational or 'genetic' social psychology (Moscovici, 1972), better able to approach the dialectics of communities. Individual thought and social reality need to be understood as mutually interdependent, mutually constitutive and mutually transformative. Phenomena must be investigated in all their complexity in order to maintain the integrity of the system as a whole.

2. A Dialectical Approach to Community

As I have argued above, we need a social psychological approach that rests on Hegelian logic to examine the dialectics of community. I would suggest that the concept of social representations does exactly this by drawing on an organic conception of the mutually constitutive relationship between the individual and the world which she inhabits.

Social representations are dynamic systems of knowledge, mutual understanding and practices. They are the tools which people use to make sense of their worlds, to interpret the novel, the unfamiliar, and the strange. Moscovici has defined social representations as:

> … "systems of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function: first to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of *a community* by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history". (Moscovici, 1973, p.xiii, emphasis added).

This approach was first proposed by Moscovici in 1961 and extensively developed over the last four decades (see, for example, Duveen, 2000; Farr, 1987; Jodelet, 1991; Moscovici, 1973, 1984, 1988, 1998). What is particularly valuable for a study of contemporary communities is that it attempts to "elucidate the links which unite human psychology with contemporary social and cultural questions" (Moscovici, 1998, p.241). This perspective, more rigorously than most others within our discipline, has theorised the intricacies of the intersubjectivity of both society and self. Its gaze is centred on the in-between, the bonds that sustain mutual understanding while establishing difference. Because the approach tackles the dialectics of cohesion and diversification, and of collectivity and individuality, it is well equipped to analyse the symbolic and socio-cognitive processes behind the construction of, the fragmentation of, and insistence on, community in the age of globalisation. Moreover it has the potential of theorising community as social knowledge, as common identities, as marginalisation and as empowerment.

Community as a Source of Social Knowledge

"Just like trees, rocks, and rivers, so languages, institutions and traditions, form a panorama of the world people live in" (Marková and Farr, 1995, p.180). In order to sustain these languages, institutions and traditions, communities must share a common means of exchanging meanings and ideas; they must also share particular symbols, histories and aspirations. Social representations become both the medium of this exchange and the content of exchange at one and the same time. "The reality of community in people's experience thus inheres in their attachment or commitment to a common body of symbols" Cohen (1995, p.16) has found in his work in the Shetlands in Scotland. Social representations, as Moscovici (1990) has stated, are "not mental creations that have social consequences, they are *social creations*, constructed via mental processes, that acquire reality" (p. 76). It is through social representations that communities establish a common reality. In making this point Moscovici cites the work of Lewin: "Reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality" (Lewin, 1948).

This reality has to be confirmed by the reality of others. We make sense of things by assessing the reactions of others. The meaning of an act is found in the nature of the response it elicits from others, as Mead (1934) has told us. Thus, through the process of social re-presentation, we come to learn about the world and we learn what are the current ways of attaching meaning to social and physical objects around us. In sharing social representations, not only do we come to build social knowledge, we also come to embed ourselves in the communities significant to us – of region, class, gender, generation, religion, lifestyle and so forth.

Communities, as I understand them, are built on and through social representations. That is, social representations make the sharing of symbols, histories, rituals and aspirations possible. They shape the cultural practices, institutions and traditions that constitute the shared experience of a community (Jodelet, 1991). Through becoming a member of different communities, and though establishing difference within communities, we take on and develop social representations of those claimed communities. In this way, communities are a source of social knowledge.

Community as a Basis for Common Identities

Community is something that arises out of our need to locate ourselves in the social worlds in which we live. It emerges from our needs to both belong and to be different (Arendt, 1958). "We are only separate (singular)", Morris (1996) has pointed out, "because of our being-in-common – without community we are deprived of our finite existence" (p.233). In establishing an identity we negotiate a position, a perspective, a viewing-point from where we see, understand, and re-present the world. This position gains its significance from a complex network of inter-relationships that we build with others. These relationships define both identity and difference. It is through both identifying with others and distinguishing ourselves from others that we locate ourselves, and are located by others, in particular communities. One cannot establish or assert an identity, without, at the same time, establishing what it is that one shares with others, what links one to various communities, and establishing what differentiates oneself from others, what makes one unique. In stating who you are you state also who you are not. These are not challenges to be faced alone: identities are co-constructed with the support and the restrictions that others present. Community, how one is part of it, how one is cut off from it, is an important part of the formation of identity.

Social representations provide the building blocks of identity as Lloyd and Duveen (1992) have found in their work on children's gendered identities. To construct social representations involves proposing an identity. This happens on both an individual and a societal level (Himmelweit and Gaskell, 1990). Social representations enable an understanding of one's past to fit with aspirations for the future. "The sense of oneself and the sense of belonging to a collective are both shaped by the knowledge, traditions, values and practices one shares with members of the community", as Gervais and Jovchelovitch (1998, p. 712) have shown with reference to the Chinese community in England. In each interaction we use the social representations of our past to make sense of the unknown, and the yet-to-be-experienced. As such they are the fabric of our narratives of self and of community.

Identifying with a community is not an unconstrained and voluntary act. There are some communities with which we are connected through the gaze of the other. Children living in a stigmatised area, such as Brixton in London, for example, may not want to be seen as 'from Brixton' and associated with its reputation for crime, drugs and poverty. However, they often have no choice in this (see Howarth, 2000, for details).

While we play a part in transforming the representations of our claimed communities, to a certain degree these representations are "imposed" onto us (Moscovici, 1984). A community cannot simply establish and develop an identity in isolation from the pressures and influences from outside that community. Community is not, as some theorists have suggested, "a voluntary construction" (Ahlbrandt, 1984, p.4). The representations within a community are not immune to, and unconstrained by, the

representations outside that community. Certain urban areas, for example, develop particularly negative reputations and those growing up in these areas cannot escape the stigmatising gaze of the dominant other (such as Brixton, in London, Moss Side in Manchester and Easterhouse in Glasgow). The meaning that a particular community acquires is something contested, and something continually contested, between those on either side of its material and symbolic borders.

Community as Means of Marginalisation and Social Exclusion

All groups in society manipulate the distribution and circulation of representations in defending their own interests. Some groups, however, especially those with access to the construction of media representations, have more resources to impose their interests over others. Some groups, as Thompson (1990) has recognised, have more power to 'make meaning stick'. Hence, we are not equally placed in the social construction of a community. Dominant groups, such as the media, political elite's, the church, state institutions, and the social groups representing these elites construct, dispense and impose particular representations which support their own interests and their own construction of the world.

The objects of such representations – those who live in marginalised communities - cannot ignore others' beliefs about them. Social representations held by others will invade their understanding of themselves, and force them to reject, accept or challenge these representations. When one does not share outside representations of where one lives, and when these representations are demeaning, the community is stigmatised. Just as Goffman (1968) described how social identities can become spoiled, a community as a whole can be spoiled in the same way. Goffman's definition of stigma is useful:

> Stigma is "an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated. … By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct *a stigma theory,* an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents. (p.15, italics added).

In everyday discourse social representations can be manipulated into '*stigma theories'* to emphasise the strangeness, the inferiority and the threat that a whole community supposedly poses. As such they maintain and justify the social exclusion of marginalized groups. Breakwell (1986) has demonstrated how social representations threaten the self-identities and self-esteem of stigmatised groups, such as people who are unemployed. In this way social representations reflect and justify the marginalisation and social exclusion of certain communities (particularly people associated with minority religious and ethnic groups, older people, people who are disabled, people with chronic illness, people labelled as deviant). It is not the case that some representations stigmatise, and others promote more positive versions of self and community. I would argue that the same representations of a particular community are be used to degrade and to affirm community. Representations are always relational.

Community as a Resource in Community Empowerment

Communities are united, at a bare minimum, by the shared experience of being seen by others as a community. Members of a community recognise the representations of others in forming a relatively coherent community identity. This is not to say that these representations are accepted without challenge. The very process of social re-presentation allows that even the most hegemonic of representations may be elaborated and transformed. For example, in using representations of black people to sustain narratives of self and of community, black individuals and communities transform racist

representations in relating them to their social memory, their common culture and their aspirations for the future (Hall, 1997). The space between the representations of others and one's own representations is a potential space, a space for challenge, for protest, and for change (Winnicott, 1971).

While it is true that communities have certain representations imposed on them, no representation is unchallengeable. This is because representations are contingent and reactive. Thus representations of the community are debated, challenged and transformed. The experiences of living in a marginalised community are not solely of oppressive stigma and spoilt identities. Recognising prejudice in the eye of the other, resisting this prejudice, and learning to construct more affirming versions of the community, are difficult challenges. If they are met and overcome, those living with stigmatising representations may be confident, assertive and proud community members.

Mobilising community can involve contesting stigma and developing affirming social representations, such as 'Black is beautiful' and 'gay pride'. Hence, social representations of a community can empower groups and individuals to oppose and reject ideological constructions that would otherwise delimit their identities. In collaboration with others, stigmatising representations can be reworked and developed to contest prejudice, inequality and social exclusion. In this way, social constructions of communities are a basis for empowerment.

In conclusion

Back (1996) has argued that "communities do not exist *sui generis*, they are created and imagined on a, more or less, daily basis" (p.238). In social psychological terms, communities are 'lived' through the negotiation of social representations and, as a consequence, through the co-construction of community identities. Communities, we have seen, are not simply groups to belong to. They may be imposed onto one; they may threaten one's self-esteem; they may be a source of empowerment. Communities emerge as the sites of struggle in the negotiation of identity, belonging and difference. The risk and uncertainty of today's 'runaway world' (Giddens, 1999) have only intensified these struggles.

Globalisation invades any imagined unity and homogeneity of communities around the globe. We can no longer discuss identity, ethnicity or community as if they were stable or distinct entities (Hall, 1991). As identities and ethnicities have become increasingly hybrid and contested, so too have the places and groups of people that we call 'communities'. Without reifying these terms, without seeking to objectify them, social scientists must tackle their complexities. A particularly fruitful tool with which to attempt this project, I have argued, is the theory of social representations.

Social representations of communities impact on our social psychology in shaping the worlds in which we live and in shaping our self-identities. We make sense of ourselves, of those close to us, of those strange to us, of both what is familiar and unfamiliar through social re-presentation (Moscovici, 1984). Social representations, therefore, play

a powerful role in the social construction of reality. When these representations concern the groups with which we identify they are all the more forceful. They can lead to discrimination, disadvantage and damaged self-esteem. They can empower self-identity, bolster psychological security and produce increased self-respect. The label 'from-community-x' may become a barrier to certain potential futures, as certain representations are imposed onto one. Alternatively, 'from-community-x' may be used as a symbolic resource with which to oppose stigma, to assert self-esteem and to insist on social recognition and inclusion. The social psychological consequences of community, therefore, can be extremely oppressive in delimiting and so excluding versions of community and versions of self. At the same time, they hold the possibility of re-construction, empowerment and liberation.

Throughout this paper I have stressed that social representations are far more than interpretative tools. They come not only to shape our understandings of intersubjectively-agreed realities, they also constitute these realities. Different representations are born of different histories; different representations give birth to different forms of the present and so nurture different potential futures. As theorists of our time, if we want to engage with potential futures, we must first develop the tools to theorise the concrete realities of the present. Social representations of communities, therefore, need to be studied because they intersect with the ideological construction of these realities.

Social representations construct different versions of a community. What are the consequences of these differences? Can we judge between different constructions of the same community? While there cannot be objectively 'true' or 'false' knowledge,

Foucault (1980) has theorised, knowledge can be legitimate or illegitimate in terms of sustaining power relations. The reproduction of power depends on the continuous and creative use and abuse of 'symbolic forms' that mystify, naturalise and legitimate social and political exclusion Thompson (1990). In defining the symbolic borders of communities in ways that intersect with relations of power, social representations legitimate or contest exclusion. As Gervais and Jovchelovitch (1998) have discussed, social representations are "normative structures. They legitimise certain understandings, beliefs and practices, while they discredit others" (p. 711). In the extreme, social representations are manipulated either to support a 'legitimate' version of the status quo, or to disrupt contemporary inequalities and injustices. In articulating the social realities of communities, they have the power both to include and exclude. They are drawn on both to naturalise and legitimise relations of domination *and* to challenge and unsettle perceived injustices.

It is for these reasons that the theory of social representations has much to offer the study of community. In this paper I have detailed how we use social representations to understand the areas in which we live and to make our experience of them meaningful. This is a psychological activity carried out by all of us in both collaboration and competition with others. There are many aspects to this: we construct community identities through taking on and developing social representations; we manipulate social representations in order to stigmatise and exclude other communities; we challenge existing social realities of communities through the use of social representations; through social re-presentation we bolster empowering versions of 'our' communities and ourselves. In examining these four aspects, the theory of social representations not only demands that ideological constructions are examined in their making, it highlights

the possibilities of resistance. Social representations are not simply impressed upon us without the possibility of debate, opposition and refusal. Even extremely disparaging representations of a community can be reworked to proclaim a proud community identity. Social representations of a community can, therefore, be empowering.

There are many questions that a social psychology of community must address. When do social constructions of communities damage, and when do they support, identities? When is 'community', as a social psychological phenomenon, a resource and when is it a handicap? When, simply, do communities oppress and when do they empower? Clearly, within social psychology, we need more research that is culturally and historically grounded to address these questions. The theory of social representations, I argue, has the theoretical rigor, methodological sensitivity and social commitment to guide this challenging and urgent endeavour.

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Table 1

- A community is a group of people who share a common history and set of beliefs (e.g. the Muslim community).

- A community is an area where those who live there interact on a frequent and supportive basis (e.g. a village community).

- A community is a collectivity of people that share common interests and hobbies (e.g. a youth community).

- A community is a group of people that co-constructs a common identity and a sense of difference (e.g. the gay community).

- A community is a body of people that are brought together through similar experiences of exclusion and discrimination imposed wider society (e.g. the black community).

- A community is a group of people that share similar work patterns and a work culture (e.g. the academic community).

- A community is a collectivity that has a common politics and economics (e.g. the European community).

Table 1