"False and Empty Bureaucracy" in Preprofessional Community-Based Practice: Learnings and Problems Experienced by a Group of University Students in Ecuador

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores valuable learning and critical problems experienced by a group of psychology students at an Ecuadorian university during a community-based training experience. The research was conducted through the lens of critical community psychology and critical discourse analysis, drawing on institutional rhetoric and a focus group with four former students. The results highlight that training experiences led to valuable theoretical and practical learning. However, ideologies linked to employability and bureaucratic control hindered learning consistent with the Freirean perspective on education and liberation, which constitutes a pillar of Latin American community psychology. What some participants called "false and empty bureaucracy" appeared to be a salient obstacle, linked to instrumentalization and dishonesty. Findings contribute to current debates regarding the possibilities and limitations of community psychology taught in universities and invite us to rethink strategies that promote ethical and epistemological coherence in training contexts.

Keywords: *critical community psychology, social psychology, higher education, professionalization, popular education, community intervention, Ecuador.*

Latin American community psychology can be assessed by examining how its concepts and methods are put into practice. Although it draws on a rich theoretical and epistemological background, its most distinctive feature is arguably its link with transformative praxis (Montero, 2006). In the university context, this practice often takes the form of what is termed "community engagement," "community service," or "pre-professional practice" (PPP): a learning space aimed at contributing in some way to social transformation (Akhurst & Mitchell, 2022; Hart & Akhurst, 2017). This exploratory study addresses the lessons learned and problems reported by a group of Ecuadorian psychology students during an experience of community-based pre-professional practice.

The analysis was informed by critical community psychology (Burton & Kagan, 2005; Fryer & Duckett, 2014; Fryer & Fox, 2015; Prilleltensky, 2008), consistent with a realist perspective (Brunson et al., 2025). Building on this knowledge, the study contributes to the academic dialogue on the scope and limitations of this particular learning space, as well as on the practice of Latin American community psychology itself. Although the training experience analysed took place in 2018, the discussion remains relevant considering Ecuador's current problems, as it allows us to clarify and reconsider what can – and cannot – be put into practice on the basis of community psychology as taught in the country, across Latin America, and elsewhere.

According to Freire (2005), education is understood as a process of critical dialogue moving from praxis to reflection and from reflection to praxis. Through reflective dialogue, educators and learners seek to make visible and promote their liberation from oppressive power relations, considering themselves protagonists of their own history. Education is thus conceived as a dynamic process, not merely reflective but also the source of transformative human activity. In this framework, Freirean thought suggests the necessity of learning to learn and to unlearn, as these are interrelated processes. Individuals are constantly relearning – learning anew what they believed they already knew – through the active, conscious, and flexible integration of familiar and new experiences. Moreover, from a critical standpoint, "unlearning" can also be understood as a mechanism that discourages certain forms of critical knowledge and competencies deemed undesirable. A banking model of

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education – as Freire termed it – would promote memorisation, passivity, obedience, and conformity, while simultaneously leading to the "unlearning" of individual and collective autonomy, critical-reflective thinking, and transformative human action.

The present study refers to a specific context: a major public university in Ecuador, and within it, the "Faculty" where the vast majority of local psychologists are trained (Capella, 2019, 2022; Capella & Jadhav, 2020; Capella et al., 2020). There, a central component has been the so-called "pre-professional practices" (PPP), closely tied to community psychology. The Faculty has carried out pre-professional practices – with clinical, educational, and organisational purposes – for nearly four decades, usually in urban areas considered popular or "marginalised." However, the process of legal reforms initiated in the country and the university approximately fifteen years ago (Asamblea Nacional, 2010) had a strong influence. From then on, rhetoric explicitly linked university learning with the concept of Buen Vivir, human rights, cognitive justice, the democratisation of knowledge, and community engagement, particularly with so-called "urban-marginal" communities. At the same time, these reforms also appear to have intensified the centralisation, standardisation, and bureaucratisation of pre-professional practices. Since 2018, the ideological context of both the country and the university have shifted; future research should clarify the impact of this change on community-based pre-professional practices.

Within the framework of the aforementioned reforms, the university proposed an educational model in 2016 that highlighted at least two types of key values: those linked to employability and those linked to reflexivity (internal normative document). Employability—although clearly implicit—was not explicitly declared as an essential value. In fact, the model criticised what it termed "cognitive capitalism." Nonetheless, it did refer to the "labour world," though it proposed that the educational emphasis should be placed on solving real problems from the professional role, reflexively, considering tensions and dilemmas, and seeking to understand that role from an interactive and contextualised perspective. Accordingly, the proposal stated that "disciplinary, professional, research, and cultural knowledge favours professional training based on the loop of practice–reflexivity–theorisation." This represents a stance consistent with Freirean views on learning and education. The institutional regulations in force at the Faculty since 2015 defined "pre-professional practices" as a "set of activities and tasks intrinsic to professional training" focused on the "application of knowledge and the connection with the social and productive environment," aimed at "responding to the needs and challenges of the social, productive, and cultural management of knowledge."

This definition illustrates the tension between two aims that, among others, the university appears to value: employability and reflexive, interactive, and contextualised learning. These normative discourses resonate with critical reflections on pre-professional practices undertaken in universities elsewhere. For instance, Hart and Akhurst (2017), referring to the case of an Australian university, argued that community-based pre-professional practices can potentially enable "anti-oppressive practices" (p. 13). However, in their words, such learning experiences may also be corrosive, ultimately focusing on the employability agenda. Thus, these practices exert "divergent pressures on the student: to challenge orthodoxy and yet comply and perpetuate it" (Hart & Akhurst, 2017, p. 13). According to the authors, when practices lack theoretical grounding and coherence, they may succumb to "pragmatic and institutional demands that threaten to make it complicit with neoliberal agendas" (p. 13). These agendas simultaneously enable (teaching certain skills) and disable (unlearning certain skills). For example, they may "skill graduates as servile managers yet deskill them as autonomous professionals; maintain the status quo, it might position problems of inequality as individual deficits or disorders and thus pathologise the individual; and deliver an educational 'product' demanded by 'consumers', including students and employers" (Hart & Akhurst, 2017, p. 13).

Such critical analyses are consistent with the theoretical perspective of this study, namely critical community psychology (CCP). According to Wiesenfeld (2016), CCP adopts an approach centred on power and ideology, incorporating a "triple individual, relational, and collective dimension" (p. 6)[1]. CCP is a proposal advanced by professionals engaged in community psychology who, dissatisfied with the discipline's development, seek to "redirect professional action toward the understanding, visibility, and overcoming of mechanisms of domination, supported by epistemological and methodological perspectives oriented towards promoting liberation, hope, participation, critical awareness, and well-being" (p. 6). Following Prilleltensky (2008), CCP prioritises psychopolitical validity, which, in Wiesenfeld's (2016)

[1]This and other translations of sources from Spanish to English were conducted by the first author

words, involves "critical reflection and awareness of the ways in which the hegemonic social order operates and participation as conditions for social change" (p. 6). This entails "revealing the ideological implications of different positions and the interests they serve" (Wiesenfeld, 2016, p. 6). Several authors have initiated or continued these critical dialogues, even pointing out the limitations of community psychology itself in being genuinely "liberating" in a radical sense (Burton & Kagan, 2005; Fryer & Duckett, 2014; Fryer & Fox, 2015; Prilleltensky, 2008).

The theoretical perspective of CCP "demands a deep and frank discussion regarding the challenges that emerge in community psychosocial practice" (Wiesenfeld, 2016, p. 6). The present work seeks precisely to contribute to this discussion, drawing on an exploratory study of a concrete experience within an Ecuadorian university in 2018.

Methodology

Design

The study design was qualitative and cross-sectional, with an exploratory scope. The research question was: What did a group of students who experienced community psychology during their preprofessional practice (PPP) learn and unlearn in the context under study? To answer the research question, the following general objective was posed: to deepen the discussion regarding what psychology students had learned and unlearned, from a critical perspective, facilitating the generation of new academic analyses and institutional decision-making. To this end, three specific objectives were met: I) to identify the stakeholders' expectations regarding PPIs and their correspondence with what happened during the experience; II) to critically analyze what was learned and unlearned during the experience; and III) to discuss ideological implications.

The PPP of interest for the study took place in a very specific context. It was managed by the public university and carried out in 2018 in Socio Vivienda I, an area institutionally designated as "urban-marginal" and "vulnerable." The PPP lasted approximately five months, including planning and fieldwork. Analyzing PPPs—even retrospectively—is essential, as they are a key process for future professional development. This, coupled with the authors' interest in topics related to educational, social-community, and critical psychology, motivated the present study. Numerous stories and informal discussions - from students and faculty at the training institution - regarding experiences related to pre-professional internships that took place in 2018 were also considered. The PPP was linked to a project on diversity—both educational and cultural—and sought to address community practice through its connection to educational psychology. The teachers of the course "Community Intervention and Popular Education" participated, and the PPP managers provided guidance.

Participants

The population of interest was the students who participated in the aforementioned PPP while in their seventh semester (fourth year) of their psychology degree programme (in the university context described above). The students who participated in this PPP are currently young psychologists practicing their profession in various settings. The sample was purposive, accessed through a "snowball" approach, with four graduates—two women and two men—who participated in the PPP analyzed here. The average age of the group was 24 years, their ethnic identity was Montubio (rural coastal area), and their religion was Catholic (most of them non-practicing). Three of them expressed professional interest in clinical practice, and one in educational practice. As they were not students at the time of the focus group, the participants discussed some of the negative aspects they had experienced, without any potential fears related to institutional repercussions. In the results section, each participant is identified by initials, safeguarding confidentiality (D, S, L, O).

A limitation of this study in relation to its participants was that, given its exploratory nature, it did not include interviews with members of Socio Vivienda I. Therefore, aspects related to the hypothetical community perspective on the process were inferred solely from the students' discourse. Similarly, the absence of voices from other stakeholders, such as teachers and representatives of state institutions governing higher education, constitutes a limitation, justified by the exploratory nature of the study.

Techniques

A focus group was conducted with the four participants in 2018, and an institutional regulatory document referring to PPPs was analyzed. The questions posed during the focus group alluded to memories of an experience lived time ago and, in that sense, were retrospective. The institutional regulatory document captured the university's formal discourse regarding pre-professional practices in the historical context examined.

Data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis, allowing for an approach consistent with CCP. Critical discourse analysis has several variants, all of which aim to explore how discourses sustain power asymmetries and potential social injustices (Reisigl, 2013); in all variants,

analytical techniques share an understanding of discourse as an ideological social practice that mediates individual and society (Fairgclough, 2013; van Dijk, 2015).

Procedure

Participants were recruited, a guide for a focus group was designed, and then such group was conducted. The session lasted approximately one and a half hours and was audio-recorded (with prior informed consent) and subsequently transcribed. The institutional policy document on PPP was identified. The analysis was carried out, constructing themes inductively, based on the discourses, and abductively, from the perspective of the PCC. This analytical procedure facilitated the contrast between what was stated in institutional documents and what actually happened in practice, according to those who experienced it.

Our analysis included both positive and negative experiences, from the perspective of the student group. We included their mention of valuable aspects—such as learning useful concepts and methods—and problematic aspects—such as bureaucracy and other institutional difficulties. The initial coding was conducted independently by each of the two authors, aiming for research triangulation that would reinforce the validity of the interpretations. Subsequently, both authors constructed their interpretations based on a reflective dialogue.

Results

Participants' Expectations

Before beginning the PPP, both the Faculty and the students expected that: (a) students would practise the role of psychologists in a community context; (b) this would contribute in some way to solving community problems; and (c) the relevant formal and institutional control requirements would be fulfilled (e.g., attendance monitoring, completing report forms, generating grades/marks, etc.). The community, hypothetically, would have been primarily concerned with the second expectation, as the others would have been of little relevance to them.

The Faculty's expectations can be inferred from the corresponding regulations. These stated that the objectives of PPP were to ensure that students, through a dynamic process, would develop their personal potential, achieve "scientific" approaches, analyse problems, and ultimately "form a professional endowed with theoretical and methodological tools enabling them to conceive intervention strategies for the practical resolution of the reality under study."

The students' expectations before beginning their practices were relatively consistent with those of the Faculty. Fundamentally, they hoped to put into practice what they had learned in the classroom, or in the words of two of them, "to practise what was learned" (S; L), and "to exercise the role of the psychologist as such; of a community psychologist" (S). For these expectations to be met, they emphasised the need for certain facilitating conditions: attendance by community members at their invitations and "for the project to be carried out as it had been planned" (S). In contrast, the graduates interviewed also stated spontaneously that, for most of their peers, passing the course was the main expectation, regardless of the quality of the activities carried out:

> "community psychology is not to the liking of most, perhaps ninety per cent of students" (S).

It is to be expected that for students not motivated by community psychology, their expectation would not be to learn and practise it, which inherently involves addressing community problems. Rather, the expectation was simply to meet the formal requirements imposed by the State to obtain a grade that would allow them to graduate and work in their chosen area as a means of supporting themselves economically. For this apparent majority, "they didn't like the theory, they didn't like that contact [with the community], they didn't like what it means to be a community psychologist" (S). Thus, "they were only interested in the grade" (S). Their motivation to meet the expectations of community institutions would have been minimal: there was "disinterest, because they didn't like it" (O); "they did it just to comply, because they knew they had to go for a grade" (S). The students interviewed, like several of their former peers, did have an interest in learning and contributing to social change. However, it is crucial to consider the existence of that hypothetical "ninety per cent" majority.

The community, hypothetically, would not have been interested in bureaucratic procedures being completed; nor might they have cared much whether the students practised their professional role. Instead, they would have expected concrete responses to their problems. In the students' words, the community expected a contribution to "try to solve some of their needs" (L). These needs to be "solved" included, for example, access to "water," as one graduate explained, or addressing adolescent addiction to illicit substances (e.g., a substance known as "H," with a relative heroin content), a problem she recalled as being highly visible in the community.

Congruencies and Incongruencies

In practice, some of the expectations described above were met—at least partially—while others were not. In contrast with many other PPPs undertaken at the institution, one student stated: "for me, they were the best" (S). Another described them as "very organised," with "well-made planning" and an appropriate "methodology" (D). They were able to "contrast theory with practice" (D) and apply some—though not all—of the "participatory techniques" learned in class, particularly those related to "familiarisation," "community mapping," and "problem trees." With respect to solving community problems, the students specifically mentioned three contributions: helping to paint a fence; providing guidance to a very small number of families on issues such as communication; and facilitating the referral of an adolescent with addiction problems to a public health centre. As for the bureaucratic expectation, it was fulfilled entirely in quantitative terms, although the quality of such control appears to be highly questionable, as will be analysed in subsequent paragraphs.

This led us to explore some of the unmet expectations. The graduates explained that although the planning was adequate, there were "irregularities" in the execution. This resulted in only partial fulfilment: "yes, it was possible to accomplish it, not everything, but most of it" (O). While the interviewees reported that most of the planned techniques were applied during the practices, those with greater transformative potential had a much more limited scope:

> "the participatory and popular education techniques, which were the objective of the project and of the whole practice, that was perhaps what could not be fully carried out."

The "irregularities" that prevented the full implementation of popular education techniques—those that were more dialogical and transformative—seem to have been linked to limited community participation and deficiencies in bureaucratic control. Regarding the "low" participation, one participant expressed:

> "I expected to have greater participation from the community, and finding such low participation was indeed a shock for me" (S).

The lack of participation appeared to have several causes. Based on the graduates' statements, one of the main reasons was that the activities carried out did not seem to align coherently with the culture and the most pressing needs of the community. As one graduate put it, referring to the "community" as the geographical space where activities were convened as part of the practice project: "sometimes no one came to the community, because they had other needs" (L). There was, for example, a mismatch between the schedules/agendas imposed by institutions and the daily routines of community life. One subgroup visited twenty-four households during the practice:

> "of those twenty-four households, ten [people] were at home, the others were not there, they were working, or they couldn't even come out because they were taking care of small children" (D).

Although, according to one graduate, participation increased somewhat at weekends, there seems to have been a gap between the times convenient for institutions and students and those suitable for the community. People engaged in labour activities (both paid and unpaid, inside and outside the home), or in their legitimate leisure time, were unlikely to be interested in taking part in activities facilitated by external actors, particularly if they did not perceive them as meaningful for their lives.

It seems that this key information about local culture and needs was never deeply understood, according to the interviewees' interpretation. They also reported that there are instances of practices in which no proper "follow-up" was carried out, at the risk of neglecting reflection on the impact—or lack thereof—regarding social transformation and the type of relationship established among the actors involved (for example, whether there was dialogue, commitment, reciprocity, and intercultural respect, or whether these aspects were disregarded).

During the focus group, one graduate highlighted the risks of ignoring the culture and actual needs of the community, as well as of carrying out approaches where there is no meaningful and mutual commitment to social transformation:

> "I sometimes feel that we just end up meddling in those people's lives ("manosear", in Spanish: to "handle" or "manipulate" them instrumentally). Yes, something gets done, but it is not something that fulfils you as a future psychologist" (O).

This "meddling" in people's lives in the community – "manosear" - appears not to satisfy the students' expectation of practising—ethically, epistemologically, theoretically, and methodologically—the "role of psychologist" in community contexts. Moreover, it also

prevents the community from meeting its own expectations, as the students fail to contribute meaningfully to addressing the neighbourhood's most urgent problems.

Such "manosear" also prevents the University from fulfilling its institutional expectations, since the community participates less, students do not acquire the competencies stated in intervention projects, and reports/controls do not always reflect genuine social transformation. In the case of the practices analysed here, the low level of participation may have been partly because— due to previous years' practices with similar shortcomings— "the community was already injured ("lesionada") (O).

Although unmet expectations were linked to limited community participation, they were also associated with deficient bureaucratic control, which two interviewees described as "false and empty bureaucracy." One of them reflected on the necessity of a certain level of bureaucracy—understood as control of processes and outcomes—to carry out any community psychology initiative; such bureaucracy should, however, be useful: "it has to serve a purpose" (D), he explained.

Nevertheless, "false and empty bureaucracy" seemed to serve no purpose at all, in the interviewees' view: "it doesn't generate any benefit for anyone" (D). The authors, however, suggest that this type of bureaucracy—apparently incongruent with institutional expectations, since it fosters dishonesty and instrumentalisation—does serve institutions: through it, jobs, budgets, and activities are justified, and the illusion is maintained that projects are achieving their goals, thereby contributing to an inflated positive image of institutions. Universities, in particular, benefit from having "evidence" regarding attendance, activities carried out, and positive results achieved.

In a certain sense, it is also useful for the hypothetical "ninety per cent" of students uninterested in community psychology: they know that "everyone is going to pass"—as one recent graduate put it—since it is enough to complete—honestly or dishonestly—the numerous forms demanded by "false and empty bureaucracy." While some benefit from knowing that this bureaucracy allows them to pass without conducting their practices in a committed and honest manner, for others it created discomfort:

> "for me that was frustrating, because I wanted to do a well-done job, and the others [did not]: it was simply because they weren't interested" (S).

One of the most alarming consequences of this situation is the virtually non-existent social transformation resulting from the practices. As analysed so far, this seems linked to the community's limited participation—likely due to the incongruence between external agents and local culture and needs—and to the "false and empty bureaucracy" that - so long as no one unmasks the illusory nature of its "evidence." - benefits institutional image and the less ethical segment of that hypothetical "ninety per cent" of students uninterested in the community field.

One graduate (S) explained that what must be done is to move "at the community's pace," with "consistency," ensuring that "the community is studied before implementing a project," through proper "design," "execution," and "follow-up." At present, he said, "what should take a year is attempted in a month," concluding that this

> "is something truly illogical for what real social transformation entails" (S).

Although the students acknowledged that "things get done," meaning that some form of contribution was made to the community, they specifically mentioned facilitating the painting of a fence, promoting "a bit more integration," and providing guidance in "specific cases within some families" (e.g., information on "nutrition," "assertiveness," "communication," "rules," "limits," or referring an adolescent with addiction problems to a health centre). However, when explicitly asked what contribution they had made to the community, one graduate was emphatic: "I believe that, as a community, at that moment, none" (S). Another graduate remarked: "I think that, if we asked the community, they would say nothing," since "the community expects something different from us as psychologists." According to her, they "thought we were going to solve problems like water," but the issues and activities proposed during the practices "were not of complete interest to the community" (L).

Once again, there are signs of apparent neglect of community culture and needs. Additionally, the graduates expressed that there are communities (e.g., rural areas or small towns) "that are not being addressed and have a tremendous need to be addressed" (S). Thus, although "things get done," the impact does not seem sufficient to stimulate social transformation in line with the Latin American tradition of community psychology:

> "to have caused genuine transformation, I did not see that" (S).

The scenario described here invites us to critically examine on the basis of which competencies local professionals are being trained; that is, what they are learning and what they are unlearning as a result of their practices. Are we teaching psychologists to "meddle with" ("manosear") and "injure" the community? To "rush," disregarding the community's "pace"? To be dishonest? To become critical, creative, and autonomous agents, or to be obedient to rules even when these make little sense or go against their ethics? Are they learning to be agents of social transformation or perpetuators of the status quo? The following section analyses what psychologists seem to have learned and unlearned from their practice experience.

What Was Learned and Unlearned

It is undeniable that the practices led to certain forms of learning. In the words of the graduates, "it was a very good learning experience" (D); "for me, that is learning or a professional benefit, because it opens doors [to work in the community field]" (D)—note here the clear nuances of motivation linked to employability. When asked whether they considered this learning "beneficial" to them, their answer was affirmative. Regarding the set of "techniques" they were able to practise, the young psychologists perceived them as useful for various domains: "you can not only apply it in a community; in fact, you can apply it in an educational context because they are participatory techniques, which you can work on with families, which you can work on with students, and which allow you to function in any field" (S). In line with the very purpose of the practices, one graduate stated:

> "what I did here as a student I will do as a professional."

What, then, did she do there as a student? One of the things they did was to apply some of the techniques they had learned, linking theory with practice. This would translate into the acquisition of technical competencies (e.g., related to observation, empathy, interpersonal relationships, analysis, and the application and interpretation of certain "instruments"). In the words of one young psychologist: they "theoretically learned participatory techniques for real engagement with the community" (S). This included work with children and adolescents; for L, who today works with this population in a private educational centre, the practices contributed to her competence regarding "how to work with them."

Based on the irregularities in the execution of planning, they also learned that for professionals to carry out community activities successfully, "everyone must work in sync" (O). This graduate's comments illustrated another type of learning resulting from the practice: the capacity for reflexivity about one's own vocation. Regarding community psychology, she expressed: "it is not for me. I know that because I already lived it" (O). Yet about her experience she added, "I go because I have to go, because it is my obligation, and to fulfil it, honestly" (O). Here, although a community psychologist was not formed, a meaningful and reflexive learning experience was nonetheless facilitated. At this point we may return to that hypothetical majority—the "ninety per cent"—who are not interested in community psychology. What competencies did they acquire? What "benefits" did they obtain within their training? When one of our participants was asked this, the response seemed discouraging: "I believe that, if you ask them, in fact, they will say nothing" (S). He himself—acting as the leader of a subgroup of this type during the practices—had once asked them directly: "they all told me that they simply hadn't learned anything in the practice." Yet it is impossible to live through an experience without learning something, although it is not always a formal kind of learning (e.g., the competence to apply a specific technique). It may—and often does—take the form of learning that is adaptive to context: ways of thinking, feeling, and acting shaped by situated social interactions.

An interpretation becomes crucial here regarding a pair of terms with porous semantic and ethical boundaries that stand out in relation to what was learned: the pair improvisation–dishonesty. The competence to "improvise" creatively in response to certain eventualities is logically desirable: one must "improvise in one way or another," since "things don't always go as planned":

> "that is what I learned: not only do we have to go with plan A, but also with a plan B of how to approach the community in order to achieve an objective" (S).

However, in a cultural context where there exists what the young psychologists called a "false and empty bureaucracy," improvisation is frequently linked with another kind of learning: the idea that dishonesty is justifiable and instrumental. The consequence of this learning appears to be extremely serious:

> "ninety per cent of the products that are delivered are false, and only ten per cent is what is really done" (S).

"False and empty bureaucracy" proves ineffective in controlling dishonesty:

> "there is no rigour to control that aspect of who attends and who doesn't. There isn't. At least in that practice, there wasn't. There was no rigour to verify that the instruments were actually applied. They could have falsified any instrument" (S).

The recent graduate went on to suggest that the reports to be filled out were instrumental—and not always honest—and therefore contributed little to professional training; the "paperwork" was:

> "annoying and, to some extent, obstructive, making students adapt to the system, because they know that in the end if they fill out that handful of papers (lots of papers), they've already passed" (S).

He also pointed to dishonesty in terms of the use given to such "papers." Students' recommendations are supposedly read by institutions, but this seldom occurs—especially considering the massive volume of papers produced by each student:

> "in the end, you write up the technical report and they don't even read it. You include some recommendations that are not always read. So there is no benefit in that bureaucracy" (S).

The testimony of another recent graduate:

> "all those papers of the technical report, the attendance sheet, the form, are the evidence that we have worked and done everything they asked us to do. Even though, in reality, at some point we hadn't done it all. So we create the need for a paper with your photo next to a lady at the community, even though you hadn't done anything" (O).

Within this "false and empty" bureaucratic logic, quantity seems to be valued over quality (which would include the truthfulness, authorship, and relevance of the data reported):

> D: "if you don't have fifty pages [in a report] it seems like you haven't done anything."

These statements seem to confront us with the illusory—and ethically questionable—nature of the "evidence" produced by community practices. It is suggested that not only technical and reflexive competencies are learned during the practices. Students with a tendency to be creative, autonomous, and critical thinkers also find themselves in a system that encourages them to unlearn such attributes. Those who do not display such tendencies would certainly not acquire them during the practices. With the relative exception of the ability to "improvise," which may—though not always—be linked to dishonesty. It is important to underline that dishonesty—although facilitated and implicitly promoted by bureaucratic processes—is not a generalised practice. For example, the recent graduates interviewed explained that, as subgroup leaders, they were responsible for monitoring their peers' attendance and handling instruments, and they claimed to have managed these tasks with complete honesty.

"False and empty" bureaucracy appears to lead students to unlearn critical thinking and praxis. In contrast, it seems to stimulate the acquisition of other tendencies associated with obedience, dependency, homogeneity, dishonesty, conformity, conservatism, and dehumanising instrumentalisation. In other words, doing what "we are told" to do, even if it runs counter to our expectations and interests, those of the community, and even those of the institutions themselves. When asked why this "false and empty" bureaucracy persists, if in their opinion it benefits no one, one participant argued that it exists because "the system demands it"; he then expressed uncertainty:

> "I don't know why they do it. As a student, you cannot refuse to do it, because if you refuse, that's simply the only way they won't give you a grade" (D).

What the students learned and unlearned cannot be explained from an individualistic perspective, that is, from the supposed deviance of certain students from the rules. Rather, these outcomes seem to be promoted by the systems´ culture of control —the so-called "false and empty" bureaucracy—as it results in behaviours adapted to that system. Everyone passes, as long as they fill in their reports; almost the only way not to pass the practices is by refusing to comply with the bureaucratic apparatus and/or being honest in the reports. Institutional representatives, both from the University and from the relevant state institutions tasked with supervising/monitoring student work, may end up teaching future psychologists that dishonesty is justifiable and instrumental. Another young psychologist referred to situations of dishonesty within the university:

"(some students) don't carry out an activity, but you have to put it (in the report). And, in fact, (professors) ask you to put it in" (S).

Although recent graduates perceive that "false and empty" bureaucracy demands fewer "papers" than before, the problem persists, sustained by obedience to directives issued by the central organs of power within the institution. It seems that—like the students—the university's teaching and administrative staff may also believe that "they cannot refuse to do it":

> "we have asked for it as students, but the Faculty (of Psychology) simply says no, that it does not depend on them, but on other authorities."

Curiously, the words of one young psychologist allowed for reflection: "what I did here as a student I will do as a professional" (O). Indeed, "false and empty" bureaucracy does not exist in isolation: it is a reproduction of the political, economic, and cultural system in which institutions are embedded. When asked whether a similar situation regarding dishonesty exists today in her workplace, one of the young psychologists confessed: "I still have to do it that way"; "I had to falsify information" (L). Upon hearing this, one of her colleagues offered a revealing reflection:

> "if we look at it from that perspective, it is actually a little funny. Because then all the bureaucracy (previously experienced during the practices) is indeed beneficial"; "now you already know how to falsify (reports)" (laughs) (S).

We have outlined thus far values, knowledge, and competencies that students learned and unlearned. They learned some techniques and had the opportunity to engage directly with the community, exercising the role of psychologist to some extent in relation to specific tasks and interactions in the community context. In addition, within the framework of a "false and empty bureaucracy," they also learned that dishonesty is justifiable and instrumental—an outcome in flagrant incongruence with the expectations declared by institutions and with the principles of community psychology.

Discussion

The discussion of results should begin by addressing what, from the perspective of Critical Community Psychology (CCP), would be the triple dimension—individual, relational, and collective—linked to the pre-professional practice process explored.

At the individual level, students exercise their agency to make decisions within structural and cultural constraints: for example, whether to commit to the community or whether to lie in a report. There is also a diversity of "individual" interests—for instance, that "ninety per cent" who do not enjoy community psychology but are structurally compelled to undertake community practices. It is worth asking why they are disinterested in transformative community praxis—an issue likely related to the dominant ideology and/or negative experiences in previous PPP. However, it would also be pertinent to ask why not develop a dialogical process of reflection: even if this will not be their future professional profile, it is possible to facilitate valuable learning (as illustrated, for example, by the student who concluded that community psychology "was not for her," but only after "she had lived it").

At the relational level, the human dimension of lived relationships should be highlighted—experiencing empathy, gratitude, or a sense of value from having "helped"—as these appear to correspond to an ideology oriented around humanism and solidarity. However, if such relationships do not contribute to "sowing" a "genuine" social transformation, they remain anecdotal and may even perpetuate structural inequities under a logic of guilt expiation: since the student has already completed their "social service" obligation during training, they no longer feel compelled to assume a role in "social transformation" during their future professional practice. The relational level also refers to the importance of adequate relationships among students, supervising lecturers, community leaders, and families, as well as among the various institutions involved in the process.

At the collective level, pre-professional practices do not appear to contribute to a "genuine" social transformation, according to the accounts of those who participated in them. By "genuine," they referred to a process that fosters sustainable social change at a structural and cultural level.

The results of this exploratory study—especially at the collective level—carry crucial implications. These include aspects related to (a) the role of power and ideology and (b) the practical challenges faced by community psychology as taught in university contexts. Both types of implications require, as CCP suggests, a "deep and frank discussion" (Wiesenfeld, 2016, p. 6). Regarding the analysis of power and ideology, one must ask what ideas and values justify the practice of "manosear"- "meddling with" - and "harming" those who are supposedly being helped, and of being dishonest in bureaucratic reporting. Regarding practical challenges, it

is necessary to ask whether the community psychology we teach in our universities can be "critical" and "liberating" in the Freirean sense; whether it should aspire to that; and how it could, concretely, move closer to such an endeavour.

It seems that two determining powers sustain influential ideologies in the type of community psychology taught at the university: market competitiveness and bureaucratic control.

In the context under study, and hypothetically in others like it, the teaching of community psychology appears to promote learning oriented more towards future insertion into the "labour world" than towards the formation of ethical, reflexive subjects committed to practices that transform society and its injustices. Such labour world, within a capitalist system, is inherently competitive and instrumental. In other words, the university—and virtually the majority of students—primarily seek to pass courses, obtain degrees, and learn competencies that facilitate success in the labour market: securing future paid employment in the public or private sector. Thus, despite a commendable and well-intentioned discourse that links community psychology learning with "Buen Vivir" – good living -, cognitive justice, and interculturality, in effect such learning would seem—at least in some cases—to become corrosive and guided by an employability agenda (Hart & Akhurst, 2017).

Within this ideological context, students learn to compete and to instrumentalise, while unlearning how to think critically about the very ideology inherent to the market. In other words, the idea is naturalised that a competitive free market is normal and desirable, and that the goal is to compete within it—even within the very market of community psychology, for example in the health, education and social fields. Given that students are taught Freirean theory, the problem would not seem to be solely the absence of an "identifiable and coherent theoretical basis" (Hart & Akhurst, 2017, p. 13); rather, the power imposed by the dominant ideology is what makes such coherence difficult in most cases.

A second form of power relates to bureaucratic control. The State may also—whether knowingly or unknowingly—impose what Hart and Akhurst (2017, p. 13) describe as "pragmatic and institutional demands" that are potentially "complicit with neoliberal agendas," focusing less on social transformation and more on delivering an educational "product" demanded by "consumers." This refers, at least in part, to the "false and empty bureaucracy," a concept that emerged from the discourses analysed in the present exploratory study.

Institutional regulations claim to aim, ultimately, to "train a professional endowed with the theoretical and methodological tools that allow them to devise intervention strategies for the practical resolution of the reality under study" (according to the analysed institutional regulations in 2018). However, in practice—beyond institutional rhetoric that claims to prioritise communities labelled as "urban-marginal"—the university appears to privilege evidence and quantity over critical-transformative reflection and quality, without clarifying how it links problems—and their potential solutions—with specific powerful groups. In the case of the university—and despite the existence of progressive regulations based on "Buen Vivir" in 2018—there appeared to be a gap between rhetoric and practice. Whether this has been mitigated or exacerbated since 2018 remains to be investigated; we hypothesize that later.

In this regard, Wiesenfeld's (2016) proposal of an "upside-down community psychology" is particularly interesting, especially in its reference to the "third agent": the governmental actor. Several psychologists trained within the community perspective—as well as other public officials—seem to have come to "naturalise practices that distance themselves from the social, ethical, and political commitments of the discipline" (Wiesenfeld, 2016, p. 9). For example, by neglecting collective efforts to transform a false and empty bureaucracy and replace it with more flexible control and evaluation strategies that enable creativity, criticality, and organised, diverse, meaningful, and transformative action. In this sense, we agree with Wiesenfeld (2016), who proposes "engagement with the third agent, promoting community psychosocial processes with this actor, including the confrontation and denaturalisation of its practices of domination" (p. 9). The aim would thus be for the third agent "to reposition and re-signify itself as a public servant, a technician, a citizen, and even a community member, with their own circumstances, rights, and responsibilities, thereby bringing communities closer to public policies and public policies closer to communities" (Wiesenfeld, 2016, p. 9).

In the specific context of the Ecuadorian public university analysed—and despite a governmental scenario that, during the period studied, privileged "Buen Vivir" and community well-being—it would appear that it was the top-down implementation of certain policies and regulations—the "false and empty bureaucracy"—that distanced policies from communities. In this case, it also facilitated that future psychologists learn to be obedient, conformist, competitive, and instrumental, while unlearning critical thinking and the reflexive courage

needed when faced with imposed and largely meaningless processes.

What can be done in response to the challenges of teaching a Latin American tradition of community psychology coherently in our universities? As Wiesenfeld (2016) suggests, we do not intend to offer unequivocal solutions, but rather to "motivate reflections and debates" (p. 3). In principle, we suggest the possibility that speaking of community psychology, critical community psychology, and "upside-down" community psychology need not be treated as rigid and fragmented categories. Instead, there are different ways of learning and practising community psychology in the Latin American tradition. These practices, if consistent with their Freirean epistemological foundation (Freire, 2005), should by definition be "critical" and reflexively evaluate the structural and cultural limitations affecting both professional and governmental actors. Perhaps it is more productive to think in terms of a continuum of positions along a gradient of community reflection and practice—from minimal criticality to radical positions—in which individuals negotiate their conformity or resistance to the status quo, relying on countless pragmatic strategies at the macro, meso, and micro levels (Campbell, 2013; Pillay, 2017; Prilleltensky & Stead, 2012).

In the context of teaching community psychology at universities, both structural and complementary mechanisms should be considered. For Martín-Baró (1998), the former refer to institutionalised power promoting transformative structures and processes, while the latter are specific, bottom-up strategies; both must be combined. Structural mechanisms alone are not sufficient—as illustrated by the case of the public university addressed here in 2018—since the evidence presented suggests that, while essential and valuable, they have been insufficient. A critical ethnography provides more saturated qualitative evidence with greater cultural validity, reaching a similar conclusion (Capella, 2019).

It is therefore suggested that, alongside structural mechanisms, greater emphasis be placed on complementary ones, particularly through critical dialogue and awareness-raising (Freire, 2005), emphasising—as implied by Wiesenfeld (2016)—subjective and intersubjective reflection within our academic-professional and public-state community. It seems that those of us engaged with community psychology from academic training spaces still have much to learn and unlearn from the diverse and complex experiences we encounter in practice. How we address these challenges will determine the future of the discipline and its ability to respond ethically to the needs of the majorities most affected by current social injustices.

Conclusions

In this study we explored learning processes and critical problems that may occur in the context of community-based pre-professional practices, based on the experiences reported in a focus group with psychology students in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and their contrast with institutional rhetoric in 2018. What did the participants learn and unlearn? The students managed to construct certain critical-reflective learnings, some with enthusiasm for social improvement and change. However, the ideology of employability linked to the free market, and excessive state bureaucracy—bureaucracy that may even become "false and empty," in the words of one participant—appeared to significantly hinder such learning, even promoting dishonesty and instrumentalisation. Moreover, these processes—among other possible causes—seemed to contribute to a disconnection between the university and the cultures and needs of the local communities with which it sought to engage.

These critical problems may not only have discouraged some students from pursuing a professional trajectory in community psychology—already a minority option during the context under study, as reported by participants—but also led several students to experience incongruence, having to "unlearn" in practice some of the ethical principles of community psychology taught in their books and classrooms: honesty, ethical commitment, and the avoidance of instrumentalising people and communities.

Considering that the national and university contexts have changed since the time when these students—now professionals—carried out their community practices, these findings must be interpreted in light of the current situation. Nevertheless, they highlight problems that, we hypothesise, may still be occurring in some Ecuadorian universities and likely in other countries as well. We suggest the importance of building more coherent and critical training, based on both structural and complementary mechanisms within universities, with an emphasis on the fundamental role of dialogical awareness processes within our own communities of academics, professionals and public servants.

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