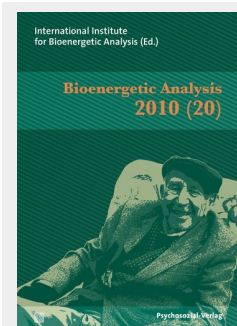


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Bioenergetic Analysis and Community Therapy

Expanding the paradigm

Mariano Pedroza

Abstracts

English

The central theme of this paper is the reflections of a Bioenergetic Therapist on his experience of working with vulnerable communities. Although this paper refers to work with many different groups, “Vulnerable Communities” is equivalent to, “precarious human settlements”, an expression more often used by international organizations (especially the UN) to refer to “favelas”. The work is demonstrated by making use of two methods: Bioenergetic Analysis and Community Therapy. The search of an integration of these models suggests a possible paradigm expansion.

Key words: Bioenergetic Analysis; Community Therapy; Culture; Social webs; Grounding; Autonomy.

Bioenergetische Analyse und gemeindeorientierte Sozialarbeit: Eine Erweiterung des Paradigmas (German)

Dieser Beitrag handelt von den Reflexionen eines Bioenergetischen Analytikers über seine Arbeitserfahrungen mit “verletzlichen Gemeinschaften”. Obwohl sich der Aufsatz auf die Arbeit mit vielen verschiedenen Gruppen bezieht, kann “verletzliche Gemeinschaften” mit “Elendsvierteln” gleichgesetzt werden; dies ist ein Begriff, der in Bezug auf die brasilianischen “Favelas” bei internationalen Organisationen (v. a. den UN) gebräuchlicher ist. Die Arbeit wird mit Hilfe der Anwendung von zwei Methoden vorgestellt: Bioenergetische Analyse und gemeindeorientierte Sozialarbeit. Der Versuch, diese beiden Ansätze zu integrieren, legt eine mögliche Erweiterung unseres Paradigmas nahe.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Bioenergetische Analyse; gemeindeorientierte Sozialarbeit; Kultur; Soziale Netzwerke; Erden; Autonomie

Analyse Bioénergétique et Thérapie de Communauté: En développant le paradigme (French)

Le thème central de cet article est celui des réflexions d’un thérapeute bio-énergéticien sur son expérience de travail avec les communautés vulnérables. Bien que cet article se réfère au travail avec beaucoup de groupes différents, le terme les “communautés vulnérables” est équivalent à “groupes humains fragiles” une expression plus souvent utilisée par les organisations internationales (en particulier l’ONU) pour parler des “favelas”. La démonstration du travail se fait à travers l’utilisation de deux méthodes: l’Analyse Bioénergétique et la thérapie communautaire. La recherche de l’intégration de ces modèles suggère un développement possible de ce paradigme.

Mots-clé: Analyse Bioénergétique; Thérapie Communautaire; Culture; Réseaux sociaux; Enracinement; Autonomie.

Análisis Bioenergético y Terapia Comunitaria: Expandiendo el paradigma (Spanish)

El tema central de este artículo son las reflexiones de un Terapeuta Bioenergético acerca de su experiencia de trabajo con comunidades vulnerables. Aunque este artículo se refiere al trabajo con muchos grupos diferentes, “Comunidades Vulnerables” es equivalente a “agrupamientos humanos precarios”, una expresión utilizada a menudo por las organizaciones internacionales (especialmente las NU) para referirse a las “favelas”. El trabajo se muestra utilizando dos métodos: Análisis Bioenergético y Terapia Comunitaria. La búsqueda de una integración de estos modelos apunta a una posible expansión del paradigma.

Palabras clave: Análisis Bioenergético, Terapia Comunitaria, Cultura, Redes sociales, Enraizamiento, Autonomía.

L'analisi bioenergetica e la terapia di comunità: Espandere il paradigma (Italian)

Il tema centrale di questo scritto è la riflessione di un analista bioenergetico sulla sua esperienza di lavoro con comunità vulnerabili. Per quanto qui ci si riferisca al lavoro con molti differenti gruppi, “comunità vulnerabili” è l'equivalente di “insediamenti umani precari”, un'espressione spesso usata dalle organizzazioni internazionali (in particolare l'ONU) per intendere le “favelas”. Il lavoro viene presentato attraverso l'utilizzo di due approcci: l'analisi bioenergetica e la psicologia di comunità. La ricerca di un'integrazione tra questi modelli suggerisce una possibile espansione del paradigma.

Parole chiave: analisi bioenergetica, terapia di comunità, cultura, reti sociali, autonomia.

Análise Bioenergética e Terapia Comunitária: Expandindo o paradigma (Portuguese)

O tema central deste artigo é as reflexões de um Terapeuta Analista Bioenergético sobre sua experiência no trabalho com comunidades vulneráveis. Apesar deste artigo se basear no trabalho com muitos grupos diferentes, refere-se ao trabalho com “Comunidades Vulneráveis” ou “assentamentos humanos precários”, expressão mais freqüentemente utilizada por Organismos Internacionais (e em especial pela ONU) quando se referirem às “favelas”. O trabalho é demonstrado através do uso de dois métodos: Análise Bioenergética e Terapia Comunitária. A busca pela integração desses métodos sugere uma possível expansão paradigmática.

Palavras chave: Análise Bioenergética; Terapia Comunitária; Cultura; Redes sociais; Grounding; Autonomia.

Introduction

According to the United Nations Organization, since 2008, for the first time in history, the world’s urban population has exceeded its rural population. Due to the serious economic, political, social and ecological problems affecting the globalized world today, many people are forced to leave their homeland in search for opportunities for a better life in the outskirts of large cities.

The accelerated growth of suburbs and *favelas*¹ – that are turned into rather precarious housing areas for an endless number of families arriving from several different parts of the country – can be witnessed in the surroundings of all metropolises. Unemployment, inappropriate infrastructure and often degrading living conditions have weakened the families and have been the cause of feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem, thus perpetuating the misery cycle.

1 *Favela*: slum, in Brazilian Portuguese.

As a resident of a large city and a therapist, I often felt insecure and powerless. My own clinical practice was very rewarding, but seemed limited and insufficient when I had to face the reality surrounding my own city. A question kept echoing in my mind: “How can I get closer, instead of feeling more and more threatened? How can I act inside these communities?” These questions were the consequence of an inner restlessness, of a need for feeling more complete and fulfilled and more deeply inserted in the social context around me.

That longing led me, in 1998, to accept the challenge of working with a group of people in communities of “*sem-terra*”² in Maranhão. That first attempt was rather difficult and frustrating, but taught me very precious lessons, which in 2001 allowed me to discover Community Therapy (CT) and to acquire the additional knowledge that finally provided for my insertion and action in *favelas* and vulnerable communities in general.

During the past nine years I accumulated considerable experience acting as a community therapist in different contexts. I was a founding member of MISMEC-DF (Integrated Movement for Mental and Community Health) and of a community therapy training center in Brasília, where I have been working as a trainer. I have also been leading and training facilitators for many development groups for community therapists, called “Caring for the Care-taker”.

In all these contexts I have always been able to feel the influence of Bioenergetic Analysis in my way of working and to confirm the precious contribution this knowledge offers to the practice with diverse social groups. I never gave up seeing individual clients in my office, as well as Bioenergetics and Core Energetics groups, contexts in which I sometimes also feel the valuable influence of CT in my way of conducting groups and sessions.

The objective of the present paper is to present the new paradigm approach of Integrative Systemic Community Therapy for working with communities and, thus, contribute to the application of Bioenergetic Analysis in social environments. I will start by telling the story of a frustrating

2 *Sem-terra*: landless, idem.

experience I had with a group of rural workers and discussing the need – and some implications – for a paradigmatic expansion in the community work. After a summarized description of the theoretical pillars that support the approach developed by Barreto (2005), the creator of the Community Therapy method, I will highlight some aspects that distinguish CT as a feasible therapy for wider systems. In closing, I will identify some relationships between Bioenergetic Analysis and Community Therapy.

1 – Report of an experience A Fish out of Water

A frustrating Bioenergetic Analysis experience in a low income rural group

I now intend to report a rather challenging experience with two very different groups of people that has taught me very tough lessons I shall never forget. I believe this report will illustrate and be useful for other therapists willing to work in similar contexts in the future.

In 1998, my wife and I were invited to join a land reform project in the state of Maranhão. Our task was to promote the integration of the technical team – made up by a group of graduate professionals – and a group of representatives of landless families, coming from several parts of the state – rural people, most of them illiterate or with a very low educational level. We were first introduced to the group of technical advisors, whose task was to help families assimilate new technologies, organize themselves into cooperatives and make their land commercially productive. The group was made up of agronomic engineers, biologists, social workers, teachers and other professionals.

We met on a daily basis for two hours, during five days. During this period we were able to carry out several group integration activities, including revitalization exercises using bioenergetics techniques and concepts that were easily assimilated and applied. Resistance arose when the exercises

challenged certain limits in the participants' "comfort zones", as expected, which was integrated as an additional aspect in the process towards a deeper self-perception, a common challenge in the work with Bioenergetic Analysis. On the last day, the group made an excellent evaluation and there was consensus that the process had been very useful and efficient with regard to its goal of integrating the work team.

Three months later, a three-day meeting was held with the leaders of landless families. Once again, our task was to help people to grow closer to each other in order to achieve greater unity in the group. This time we were asked to work with the group of rural leaders. At the end of each work day we had one hour for meeting and working on promoting greater integration.

Since the very beginning, when I introduced myself to the group and started talking about the nature of the work we would be carrying out together, I noticed the awkward expressions and the silence hanging over the room, indicating that my words did not seem to mean what I was trying to say. I immediately felt displaced, as if I were speaking a foreign language. I tried to communicate using the most simple words I could, but it was not a matter of the complexity of the Portuguese language I was using, but rather the lack of familiarity with the proposal itself and the way it was being presented.

The reality we faced during those days quickly brought to light the limitations of our concepts and techniques for dealing with that context. Due to our naivete regarding the possibilities of application of Bioenergetic Analysis resources – at least in the way we had learned – and our absolute lack of experience with that type of audience, had caused us to accept a mission for which – at the time – we were not qualified. The group did its best and tried, as much as possible, to follow our instructions. We, on the other hand, tried to feel and perceive the reactions of people, trying to position ourselves and to somehow adapt the exercises and group dynamics we were proposing. Thanks to the goodwill available on both sides, our work was not a complete failure, but we left the first meeting with the clear feeling that we were facing a challenge greater than we could handle.

We spent long hours in anguish, trying to be creative and to conceive ways of adapting our work to that peculiar setting. I will not describe the dynamics we used in detail, but today, after a few years of experience working in social exclusion contexts, I can say that the concepts and techniques of Bioenergetic Analysis are valid and can be properly applied, as long as there is a “cultural translation” of such concepts. That requires an understanding of the culture as a code of communication and symbolic references and a certain degree of experience by the therapist as a “translator of codes”. It also requires humbleness and an open mind for learning with the community, on equal terms.

2 – The need for paradigm expansion

“Without the individual, there is no community and without community, even the free and self-secured individual cannot in the long run prosper.” (Jung)

2.1 From unitary to COMM-unitary

Two basic pillars of Reich’s theory and of Bioenergetics are: the concept of *functional unit*, which allows us to perceive the biological and psychological dimensions as aspects of the same energetic phenomenon, and the concept of *character*, which provides the basis for our understanding of the formation and functioning of personality as a synthesis of the shock between the natural biological impulses and the process of adaptation to culture and its rules for social living. As Lowen (1985:11) said: “Bioenergetics is a way of understanding personality through the body and its energetic processes (...) the amount of energy a person has and how she uses it determines how she responds to life’s situations.”

Our work is built on this way of perceiving the individual, based on

his energetic functioning. In our clinical practice we use the knowledge we have of the body's energetic processes and our understanding of how such processes echo in our relationships and in life as a whole. That is a very useful perspective: when we include the body's involuntary processes in our work, we are able to access, to understand and to intervene in the unconscious functioning of our client at a very deep level.

Nevertheless, since this approach is very much centered on the *individual*, it is insufficient for facing the complexity of the contexts provided by vulnerable *communities*. Issues such as unemployment, social violence, migration, ethnical, cultural and religious differences and others that characterize today's communities lead to a loss of grounding by individuals and families. Such issues are systemic in nature and cannot be addressed in an isolated manner – they call for collective and self-sustainable solutions.

We need a perspective or paradigm that may provide a more encompassing understanding of such multidimensional issues and that may lead to an intervention model capable of responding to such challenges. Such a new perspective implies in, without losing sight of the *individual* and his particular web of relationships, perceiving the *community* as the “client” to be served. Only such essential change in our approach – from the individual to the collective, from the “unitary” to the “communitary” – will enable us to conceive ways of responding to the challenges faced by low income populations.

That was the change in approach that I lacked when, in my naivety, I did my best to work with that group of people coming from communities of landless workers in Maranhão. I recognized that my own resources were not sufficient for dealing with that challenge, but at that time I could not assess precisely what was missing. Three years later, when I met professor Adalberto Barreto and the trans-disciplinary model of CT, I finally was able to integrate the “failure” I had experienced and acquire the understanding and the technical tools required for acting as a therapist in contexts of social exclusion.

2.2 A trans-disciplinary perspective

A few implications of this change from the unitary to the communitary approach must be considered. When we acknowledge the community as “the client”, we must go way beyond a purely bio-psychological concept of human issues and include social and cultural dimensions. Therefore, we must open ourselves to the contributions provided by other fields of knowledge.

It is worth remembering that Reich, in his search to expand the clinical work in order to allow for greater social coverage, started a greater personal involvement with the social movements of his time. He had to reach beyond the psychoanalytical theory and include sociological, pedagogical and anthropological theories. Through his involvement with “proletarian” communities, Reich also acknowledged the need for a trans-disciplinary paradigm.

This paper does not intend to discuss the theory of Community Therapy (CT) in depth. Nevertheless, in order to allow readers to better understand the topic, I will briefly introduce its theoretical pillars: systemic thinking, cultural anthropology, the theory of communication, resilience and the pedagogy of Paulo Freire.

Systemic thinking says that “crises and problems only can be understood and solved if we perceive them as integrating parts of a complex network filled with ramifications that provide for connections and relationships among people within a whole that involves the biological dimension (the body), the psychological dimension (mind and emotions) and society. Everything is connected, every part depends on the other parts. We are a whole, in which each part influences and interferes with the other parts” (BARRETO 2005: XX).

Cultural anthropology says that, “culture can be understood as a reference to be used by each group member for assessing and distinguishing values, for thinking and making choices in life. Culture is a code, an essential element of reference for our personal and our group identity” (BARRETO 2005: XXII).

Theory of communication says that communication between people is the bond that holds individuals, families and societies together. Every behavior – either verbal or not, individual or by a group – is a communication. Ambiguous communication is harmful to relationships. Therefore, it is extremely important that we search for clarity and sincerity in communication, since that can be a real tool for transformation and growth.

The concept of resilience allows us to understand that the process of facing difficulties and overcoming adversities leads to the acquisition of experience-based knowledge. Namely, where there is suffering, there's a possibility for human growth. Focusing only on the shortcomings, on what "does not work", may lead to a feeling of powerlessness and reduced self-esteem. According to Barreto (2005: XXV), "The essential goal of Community Therapy is identifying and awakening the strengths and skills of individuals, families and communities so that they may, through these resources, find their own solutions and overcome the difficulties imposed by their environment and by society."

Paulo Freire's pedagogy shows us that willingness for dialog with people, sharing and exchanging experiences is a pre-condition for working with communities. To teach is an exercise of dialog, exchange, reciprocity. Freire (1983: 95) says:

"Self-sufficiency does not go with dialog. Men that lack humbleness or have lost it cannot get close to the people. They cannot be their companions in pronouncing the world. Someone incapable of feeling and knowing himself as much a man as the other still has a long way to go before he reaches the place where he can meet them. At this meeting place, no one is absolutely ignorant or absolutely wise: there are only men seeking to know more in communion."

3 – A coherent structure in unforeseeable contexts

CT is characterized by being a very simple model, applicable to an endless number of contexts and physical conditions, and applicable to different

populations and age groups. When the context is marked by the unexpected, by uncertainty and frequent and disconcerting emergency situations, establishing an inflexible service model is impossible. The reality of such contexts always requires “presence of mind”, flexibility and creativity for dealing with the unexpected. On the other hand, if we do not have a very clear axis for conducting our work, we are at risk of losing the course during the session, opening the way for confusing or even chaotic situations.

Therefore, a CT session is structured into clearly defined stages – welcome/theme selection/contextualization/problematization/aggregation rituals/evaluation – establishing a “backbone” for a coherent conduction, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Simple and clear rules – remaining silent in order to listen to the one who is talking/talking about one’s own experience in the first person/no advice giving or lecturing or preaching/singing known songs, telling jokes, stories or quoting sayings associated to the topic being discussed – determine that each person shall talk only about his or her own experience and avoids that others may position themselves as if they knew best with regard to the other person’s life, judging, counseling or lecturing.

Thus, the CT structure allows to simultaneously serve a large number of people in a multiplicity of contexts. In my practice as therapist, I had the opportunity to participate in sessions with groups of 6 up to 200 people in places as different as health care stations in the periphery; public hospital corridors; doing “itinerant therapy” in the homes of community residents; in the shed used for community gathering; the public square; the patio of a prison and others.

I believe it is worth mentioning that CT circles usually are open to the public and anyone can show up without prior notice and without committing him or herself to continue a process. There also are no restrictions whatsoever with regard to age, sex, ethnicity, religion or relationship among participants. Such openness allows for multiple group configurations, which come up spontaneously, without excluding anyone. It also allows people that are interested in just getting familiar with the proposal to participate without any obligation to speak. The combination of a simultaneously

well-structured and flexible session allows the therapist to deal with the unforeseeable nature of the context, without losing the “thread”, and offers the community the freedom to self-regulate its own process. As highlighted by Grandesso (2004), in her article “*Terapia Comunitária – Um contexto de fortalecimento de indivíduos, famílias e redes*”:

“Additionally, Community Therapy does not depend on the same people giving continuity to the therapeutic process, session after session, thus expanding its reach and feasibility even further. It is a special therapy model in which each session has the character of a therapeutic act³, with a beginning, a middle and an end for those people attending the session on that day. On the other hand, if we consider that a major part of the group may attend the therapy sessions on a more or less regular basis, we also can consider that, for the community, the Community Therapy ends up becoming a therapeutic process carried out along time.”

3.1 A structure with an “orgastic curve”

The structure of a CT session leads to Reich’s concept of an *orgastic curve*. The welcome phase starts the group integration process, establishing the “rules of the game” and allowing people to relax by using playful body dynamics. The selection of a theme raises the tension and provides for space for people to expose the issues they wish to address, identifying the focus of the group energy and choosing the topic to be worked with in depth. Next, during the contextualization stage, one person reports his or her story and the group asks questions, leading to a progressive increase of the tension and of the session’s emotional load. When the climax is reached, when the people have identified themselves to a high degree and have gotten involved in the topic, the “motto” – a key question that will allow for the group’s reflection during the therapy – is put on the table, starting the

3 This expression was a contribution of psychologist and therapist Sônia Fonseca, a trainee at the NUFAC-PUC-SP-2003 Community Therapy course, based on her experience as a psychodramatist.

problematization stage. The accumulated energy can then be discharged. People that identified themselves with the topic may now let out, sharing their own experiences associated to the topic. After a satisfactory discharge, the group stands up and forms a very tight circle for the aggregation ritual stage. The therapist thanks the group for its trust and gives feedback to the participants that exposed themselves, giving a positive connotation to the stories told. People feel touched, relieved and can relax in the group's solidarity embrace. After the good-byes, the team of therapists internally reflects about each stage of the session during the evaluation stage.

Motto

Contextualisation

Problematization

Topic selection

Aggregation rituals

Welcome

Evaluation

4 – In search of an integration

Along the years, through my work as a Bioenergetic Analyst and Community Therapist, a few aspects of both approaches – Bioenergetic Analysis and Community Therapy – have been the object of much deeper thinking. I will briefly analyze these aspects that provide the basis for my practice and that illustrate the way how the two approaches integrate and complement each other.

4.1 The body, a transcultural basis

“The body is the beach of the ocean of being.” – Sufi (anonymous)

An important aspect regarding the contribution that body psychotherapies can give to group work in several different cultures must be highlighted: working

with a biological basis is a universal fact. Ekman (1999) defines “basic emotions” as the emotions that can be identified in the corporal expression and, most of all, by the facial expression of people, transculturally. Every human being, irrespective of race or culture, has a body, breathes, moves and gets emotional. As we all know, at the basis of our bio-psychological functioning, there are deep energetic processes – charge/discharge, flow/blocking, tension/relaxation, etc. – governed to a great extent by physiological mechanisms associated to the primitive, instinctive parts of our brain and nervous system that are not under our conscious control. That becomes very obvious when we face traumatic situations that threaten our lives and that activate our survival instinct. According to Levine (1999, 19): “Even though our intellect often supersedes our natural instincts, it does not command the traumatic reaction. We are more similar to our four-legged friends than we like to think.”

The fact that Bioenergetic Analysis offers a deep understanding of the expressive resources, of the involuntary movements – in short, of the energetic functioning of the organism – allows for the development of psychocorporal work that is extremely beneficial for people in any culture. David Bercei, for example, developed a simple sequence of exercises, capable of producing waves of involuntary movements (neurogenic tremors) that help dissolve chronic tensions from specific muscle groups associated to the freezing state produced by traumatic experiences. His exercises have helped many traumatized people and have been successfully applied to populations from very different cultures.

I am convinced today that other sequences can be developed with different purposes and that, as Bioenergetics therapists, we are in a position to contribute enormously to the work carried out with communities in several different cultural contexts.

4.2 Culture: Poison and Remedy

Reich and Freud held meetings for debating the relationship between civilization and neurosis, particularly with regard to whether sexual

repression and the frustration of the instinct were necessary for our cultural formation (Boadella, 1985). Such discussions were especially relevant with regard to the search for a broader social intervention. I think that this debate remains valid and up to date, since ecology or man's relationship with nature is an issue that remains far from a solution, calling for effective answers on which our very survival as a species may depend upon.

The ecological imbalance produced by man's action on the planet reflects the imbalanced relationship that man has with his own nature. Culture imposes a conditioning that usually gets into conflict with the vital impulses of the child, forcing it to develop an "adaptation strategy" – the formation of character. Such strategy implies – at least partially – in the building up of an armor by the body and, to a greater or lesser extent, in a personality splitting that – at best – leads to neurosis. In this sense, culture can be viewed as a "poison" that castrates and distorts the nature of the child.

On the other hand, culture is an important organizing reference for social relationships and is the cornerstone of the constitution of identity, a heritage that links us to the knowledge of our ancestors. The loss of such reference would imply – at least partially – in losing ourselves. This is recognized today by the United Nations Organization. According to the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (article 1):

"Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations."

Especially in working with communities, there is no doubt that the rescue of values, references and cultural expressions is a "remedy" that helps people that have been upset by the loss of their origins to reestablish a feeling of belonging and self-esteem.

4.3 Translating “Cultural Codes”

As mentioned before, with its knowledge on the energetic functioning of the body and its technical possibilities, Bioenergetic Analysis can contribute with practical and potentially universal tools to the work with diverse populations. On the other hand, it also became clear that for humans, culture may be just as determining as biology and must be taken into account. As reported in my first experience with rural workers in Maranhão, I experienced serious difficulties in applying bioenergetics concepts and techniques to that group. The concepts and techniques were not inadequate for those people. What produced an “awkward feeling” was my inability to understand and use the appropriate “cultural codes”. Culture is a multi-dimensional communication code that, in addition to the verbal code – the language – includes gesture codes, musical codes, scent codes, etc.

When I joined the first training group for community therapists in Brasília, in 2001, the modules – a happy surprise – already included breathing exercises, movement and emotional expression. Since then, I have learned very, very much from watching how Barreto culturally adapts the dynamics, translating concepts and work objectives into images, sayings, tales and metaphors taken from popular knowledge. In his words: “culture is a code and the therapist must be a translator of codes.”

A very useful element for adapting our techniques to the community context is the use of rituals. By conducting CT groups, I learned to properly integrate technical tools from Bioenergetic Analysis that were very useful in helping to dissolve blockages imposed by the armor by using “rituals”. As an illustration, I will report a situation in which an elderly woman, whom I will call *Dona Tereza*, tried to speak out and lost her voice. I told her she didn’t have to hurry, asked her to breathe and to start talking when she was ready. In her second attempt, she started a sentence and then got stuck again. I noticed the strong throat block that kept her from expressing herself. After her third attempt, she wanted to give up speaking. I then asked her and the whole group to stand up. Told them we would do an exercise for getting rid of the blockages and burdens that suffocated and strangled us:

“Let’s remember all the times we had to *swallow a frog*⁴, swallow our tears, to lower our heads and shut up ... ”

With the feet firmly on the floor, breathing in deeply, we raised our hands up high as if we were grasping a heavy burden and, screaming out loud, we threw this imaginary weight on the floor in the middle of the circle. The group, strongly identified with Dona Tereza, performed the movement and yelled out vehemently, and Dona Tereza, no longer feeling the focus of all attention, gave in to the exercise. After a few collective screams, we set down again and Dona Tereza spoke out.

Had I tried to unblock Dona Tereza’s throat individually in front of the group, I probably would have failed and she would have felt exposed. By “ritualizing” the exercise and transforming it into a collective dynamic, Dona Tereza felt protected and supported, instead of feeling exposed, and the group as a whole benefitted from the expressive body work.

4.4 Bioenergetics in a “favela”

In the beginning of this paper I described my first attempt to use bioenergetics with a group of landless rural workers and the difficulties I had in dealing with the challenges I was faced with. Since then, the years of practice with CT have given me the means to insert myself in “favelas”, bond and build trust, creating conditions to also introduce Bioenergetics in a manner that makes it accessible to a broader range of people. There are basically three different contexts in which I use Bioenergetics associated with community work:

- 1) In the training groups for Community Therapists – in this case, body oriented psychotherapeutic work is an integral part of the training. Although there are usually some participants who live in “favelas”,

4 “To swallow a frog” is an idiomatic expression that means the person in a given situation had to swallow her words and her feelings.

- the group is usually mixed with highly educated people. This setting is therefore closer to other training groups;
- 2) During CT sessions – either as a warm up before the session (similar to an exercise class) or, as in the example with Dona Tereza, as an element of the session to help someone or the group overcome a specific difficulty;
 - 3) In groups organized in the community for “Stress Management and rescue of Self-Esteem” – We usually organize such groups when we already have built a relationship of trust with a good number of community members. In this setting, intense bioenergetic work can be appropriately used with populations at risk⁵.

In order to give the reader a clearer idea of how Bioenergetics knowledge and techniques can be successfully applied in contexts of vulnerable communities, I will now present a session that I was invited to lead in Pirambu, one of the biggest “favelas” of Fortaleza, in Ceará, birthplace of Community Therapy. I will also stress some specific elements in the way the work was conducted that made the difference in terms of how the group grasped the concepts and surrendered to the experience.

It is important to mention that because the project has existed in that community for many years, a bond of trust already existed. The group was large, about 80 participants of different ages and although many people were there for the first time, there were also many participants who were already familiar with this kind of work. This allowed me to risk going into an intense work.

Introduction: To begin with, I explained that the exercises we were going to do were “good for our health”, that they were meant to help us “get rid of tensions and stress that accumulate in our bodies and make us suffer, provoking insomnia, depression, illnesses etc”. I also said that the techniques we

5 “populations at risk” is commonly used by the United Nations to refer to populations living in very precarious conditions where there is lack of access to basic infrastructure and services such as education, health care etc.

would use were safe, they have helped thousands of people, of all different kinds of background and religions, in many different cities and countries. *It is important to notice that this kind of language can be instantaneously understood because it refers directly to the reality of the great majority of the group, it speaks directly to their experience and suffering.*

Building a safe environment: Next, I used a process that I learned from Barreto to create a safe setting. In pairs, in a circle, one person (A) stands with the eyes closed and knees slightly bent. The second person (B) – the “guardian angel” or “care-taker” – stands behind (A) placing the hands on his/her shoulders. With soft music on the background, the “guardian angels”, while doing a “massage” on the shoulders of the “protected ones”, were asked to repeat about three times, in a low voice, the following sentences: “Who are you?”; “What is your pain or your suffering?”; “What have you been learning from it?”; “What have you been doing for yourself?”; “Know that you are not alone, you can count on me!” While each sentence is slowly and repeatedly pronounced by the “guardian angel” (A), (B) remains silent, only feeling, breathing and listening to the inner resonance, inner answers. For some people this experience already touched deep emotions, the room was filled with a calm, dense atmosphere. Some people, as they later shared, had never had a reference of a safe, protecting presence in their lives. After changing roles, we were ready to begin the body work.

Notice that the sentences used suggest that we can grow from our pain/suffering (resilience). There is also an emphasis on bringing about the support that exists in the group, and to create a sense of belonging as opposed to being alone. The “collective or social dimension” is often underlined in the work.

Grounding and building charge: More dispersed in the room, I told the group to close their eyes as I told them a short tale: “One day a man was sad, disappointed with life, depressed, thinking of ending his life. As he walked towards a cliff, he met a big tree, so filled with life, with such bright colors and sweet fruits. He was so surprised with that tree that he stopped in front of it in admiration. In silence, he asked the tree – Please, tell me your secret, if life is so sad, painful, so rotten, how can you be so

colorful and give such sweet fruits? In its silence, the tree answered – In my deepest roots, I have learned to take all the garbage, all rotten things, and transform them into nutrients, this is what helps me to grow strong and colorful and give good fruits.” I explained that, like the tree, we need deep roots in order to grow strong and give “good fruits”. The body work that followed was all the time associated to the image of the tree. So, during the day, the trees will look for the sunlight, spread their branches to “find a place under the sun” (hands up reaching towards the sky, movements with the arms etc – *limits/individuality*) and at the same time they need to cooperate in order to create a forest (*inter-dependence, collectivity*). At night the trees move all their sap (juice of the plant) to their roots (relax the arms, neck, bend forward, move toes, feet etc). Using such images, we alternated between stress positions, stretches, the “wind blowing” would help to open the breathing etc.

Expression and discharge: I said that in the forest, there is a tribe of warriors preparing to fight. Many enemies – depression; fear; despair; stress; worries; insomnia etc – were trying to destroy this tribe. To stimulate sound and go into more expressive work, I used a very simple game that children play very spontaneously in many different cultures: I asked everyone to simply imitate me, my gestures and my sounds. I then began, in a “playful” way, to move and open my voice. As the group responded, I used rhythm as a way to establish a common pace and strengthen the “collective field” or “container”. Many variations were used, moving sideways in the circle stamping our feet and voicing different vowels, inverting the direction, placing two fingers below eyes and looking into the eyes of other group members etc. Sometimes we would go into more aggressive expressions, somewhat similar to warriors in a ritual preparing for war. As the group responded, we went more and more into strong expressive gestures and sounds, including key words like “no” or “get away” etc.

At a certain peak moment, we moved into a tight circle with our arms around each other forming a firm group embrace. I told the group that nowadays we see a lot of violence and crime, the level of fear is very high, and when we are afraid our bodies shrink and get tight and tense. I said we

would get the fear out of our bodies. Remaining in the tight embrace, with our knees bent, and lifting our heels off the ground, many people started vibrating. Then, with the feet firm on the ground, eyes wide open, I said that we would let the fear out using a high pitched scream. The group responded strongly, and a few people went hysterical, screaming and stamping their feet – *had they not been held tight in the group embrace they would have been running the risk to hurt themselves*. At this point we started making a strong low pitched sound and started stamping our heels on the floor to bring the energy down. We then moved gradually into softer sounds and movements that helped to ground the group (stamping our feet rhythmically, bending and stretching the knees etc). When it felt safer, we let go of the tight embrace but kept in contact holding our arms, later moving on to holding hands until we could finally let go of our hands and be silent for a moment. Three “old timers” started spreading mattresses around the room.

One important element that, in my perspective, makes this kind of work safe with such a big group is the permanent use of elements that strengthen the “container”, the “collective field”. You can notice that I didn’t stop leading the group to deal with the people who were flooding. On the contrary, I focused on grounding the group as a whole. The field created by such a big group is extremely powerful. If a strong “current” is created – by the use of rhythm for example – the individuals who are momentarily flooded can be “pulled back” by the “current”. In the example above, it is important to also notice that the “group embrace” created a very safe holding, making it possible to have some hysteria without risk of anyone getting hurt. Had I stopped to deal with the floodings individually, the “current” would have been fragmented and the group would have been at risk.

Integration and sharing: Everyone laid down on their backs with their eyes closed. With soft music on the background, they were asked to breathe in through the nose and breathe out through their mouth ... breathing in new life ... and breathing out all their worries into a balloon ... then watching the balloon move up to the sky until it disappeared. Then they were asked to imagine they were laying on wet earth or clay ... and to allow the earth to pull the toxins, poisons etc out of their bodies ... and then to draw

with their inner vision the shape of their bodies on the floor ... then they imagined a waterfall with clear water near them and they cleaned themselves in the pure water ... and dried themselves in the sun and the breeze. Then, still with their eyes closed, they were asked to reach and find the hands of the people next to them ... and feel that there are other people who are looking for a healthy, peaceful life, other people who are “walking the same path” ... to conclude, they placed one hand on the heart and the other on the belly ... “feel that you can also count on yourself”.

They were then asked to sit down. I explained that after this kind of work, we always give people the opportunity to share their experience or ask questions. First of all because we learn a lot from each other’s experiences and second because some people might have felt or experienced things that they didn’t understand and it is important to have the space to talk about it. As we do during a Community Therapy session, people were allowed to interrupt at any moment with songs, poems etc, related to the theme that was being shared. The sharing allowed more time for people to integrate the experience. As usual in these sharings, people expressed pieces of their experience that were either more intense, or more meaningful to them. Some people made direct connections with their life history, others needed some help, through questions, to make some connections. When deep feelings were touched again, the songs would serve as a soothing element, allowing time for the person to be with the feeling and at the same time helping the energy to flow in the group. After about thirty minutes of sharing, we stood up and gave “at least ten hugs” before leaving the room.

As I have mentioned before, the bioenergetic principles, concepts and exercises can give an important contribution for the work with populations at risk, and there are many different ways in which sessions can be structured in order to be appropriately used in such contexts. In my experience, a few simple aspects make the difference in terms of how the group assimilates the directions of the facilitator and responds to the work: 1) Introducing the work in very simple terms, making direct reference to the real issues that make people suffer in their daily lives (stress; depression; fear; insomnia etc); 2) Using a diversity of codes (verbal, images, music, movement etc.)

– *some people will be resistant to the verbal code but will respond easily to rhythm and movement for example*; 3) Using elements that will stress and strengthen the collective field, the group cohesion, the social dimension, the sense of belonging, of trust in the group, group support etc. When these elements are creatively included in the structure of the session, a safe setting is created and the group responds.

4.5 The “community body”

According to Lowen (1985, 11), “Bioenergetics is a form of therapy that combines work with the body and the mind to help people resolve their emotional problems and realize more of their potential for pleasure and joy in living”. The body is central in Bioenergetics clinical work, as it reveals so much about who the person is. In the body we can identify the wounds, the distortions and compensations caused by the history of life. The body also reveals the vital force and the creative resources that are available to the person. Bioenergetic Analysis considers that the body has its own wisdom and a great potential for resilience, that is, a great capacity to overcome traumatic situations and, in the process of overcoming, to transform suffering into learning and growth. The work we do while helping the client to “re-connect” himself to his body, aims to create favorable conditions for the body to rescue its vitality and its own path towards recovery. In other words, we trust the body and we try to encourage its natural capacity to overcome its own limitations.

The same principles can be applied when working with a community. We can conceive a “community body”. The community, as well as the individual, presents symptoms that derive from painful events that generated fear, violence, disaggregation, fragmentation. The “community body” also develops “defenses” and “blocks” that hinder the integration and the natural and creative flow of vital energy. To a certain extent, we can apply our Bioenergetics paradigm to the “community body”. We can trust the living organism – the community – and search for ways of promoting clear and

sincere communication, bringing people closer to each other, strengthening the ties and reducing the level of fragmentation of the “social tissue”. That allows the creativity of the community itself to manifest, opening the way for resources and solutions for existing problems, both individual and collective ones.

In Bioenergetics clinical work, body reading provides information that is very precious for the therapeutic process. Among other things, it helps to diagnose the person’s degree of fragmentation, as well as to identify where her strength and possibilities are. We can also “read” the “community body”, but the main tool for diagnosing the degree of fragmentation and for identifying where and how energy either flows or is blocked is assessing the *quantity and quality of ties* between community members.

Therefore, it is essential for the work to lead to the strengthening of relationships between people, because individuals will find support and strength for overcoming challenges and fighting for their dreams in their “network of ties”. The deeper the emotional ties, the greater the union and cohesion of the “community body”, allowing it to find its own creative exits for its deadlocks.

4.6 Grounding and Community Therapy

“In a much broader sense, grounding represents an individual’s contact with the basic realities of his existence” (Lowen: 1985, 23).

The concept of Grounding is key in Bioenergetic Analysis theory and practice and may be understood as a “rooting in the earth”, i. e., the person’s capacity to enter into contact with herself and with the outside world. In *Grounding e Autonomia*, Weigand (2006) presents the historical evolution of the concept of Grounding, including valuable contributions from other psycho-corporal, analytical and systemic approaches that helped to expand our understanding and our interventions. The author differentiates between several types of grounding, including: postural grounding, internal ground-

ing, grounding thru the eyes, grounding in the family, in the culture and others. Such expansion of the Grounding concept is essential for working with communities, since it offers new possible directions for promoting the strengthening of the “rooting in the earth”, especially when dealing with poor populations, with limited resources. Next I will share a few considerations on the elements that, in my perspective, promote grounding during a CT session and develop the grounding of the community along time.

As mentioned earlier, the established structure and rules provide a “basis”, a “ground” and – why not – a grounding for the therapist to conduct the process. But there are also other aspects of CT that promote the grounding of individuals, of the group and of the community that deserve being highlighted: the narrative process as a means for building *internal grounding*; the use of the collective energy field as a *continent*; the horizontal pulsation of energy as *relationship grounding*; grounding in the family, in the community and in the culture.

“Having a substantiated understanding corresponds to having one’s *feet firmly planted on the ground*. Such ground *needs* to be both material and *symbolic*” (Weigand: 2006, 45). One of the ways by which such “symbolic ground” is strengthened in CT is through the practice of the narrative. Trauma studies have shown that a traumatized person tends to narrate events in a fragmented and confused manner. The narrative is jeopardized, hampering the integration of the experience. We may say that the person “lost her ground” and tends to build limited and imprisoning narratives. During the session, the group – while preparing questions in an attempt to obtain a clearer understanding of the story being told – exercises its capacity to focus, to listen and to understand. While answering the questions, the individual exercises his capacity to set his experience into words, expressing himself with clarity and, at the same time, processing the feelings that come up, since reports usually are highly loaded with emotion. Thus, by reporting a painful or an even traumatic experience, the person is helped in the reconstruction of her narrative, which equals an internal reorganization of the experience, both emotionally and cognitively and, as a consequence, a strengthening of her *internal grounding*.

Stories told by individuals during a session can be considered as the *content* and the group's collective energy field is the *continent* that receives, provides support and helps to process it. I remember how John Pierrakos, when working with someone, would sometimes turn to the group and say: "Come on! Breathe!" He always kept an eye on the individual and another on the group. He was aware of the fact that, whenever the group holds the flow of energy, working with the individual will be more difficult. In CT, the session's grounding is supported to a great extent by the cohesion of the group's energy field. Creative interventions can be used – such as jokes, poems, sayings and especially songs – and they often are offered by the group itself, transferring the focus of attention from the individual to the collective, thus helping the energy to circulate. That strengthens the *continent* (the circle), which on its turn favors working with the *content* (the emotional narratives of individuals). This resource is especially important when the emotional load is too intense or when the content of the discourse is too heavy: once the energy flows around in the circle, it can alleviate the person, adding lightness and fluidity to the process.

Another extremely important dimension of grounding during CT sessions is benefitting from the horizontal pulsation of energy. According to Weigand (2006, 47), "Horizontal pulsation corresponds to the grounding created through relationships. Such pulsation flows from the genitals, from the heart, from the solar plexus, from the throat and from the eyes. It is responsible for communicating with others and with external objects." By creating an environment that welcomes feelings, CT promotes a sincere communication between people and grounding through horizontal pulsation. The group's careful and respectful listening produces a fertile environment for resonance and mirroring that strengthen the feelings of union, supporting the process as a whole.

CT being a systemic approach, we always try to strengthen family grounding. When contextualizing the issue presented by someone, it is important to include the family system – both the nuclear and the extended family – in the vision field. Simple and direct questions regarding the family structure helps us see how the person is inserted in the context of the fam-

ily system's relational dynamics. Such contextualization usually produces new awareness movements, bringing into light aspects of the narrator's history that had been there only as a backdrop. On one hand, "invoking" the family system facilitates the processing of "pending issues", such as incomplete mourning, ancient griefs, foul relational dynamics, etc. On the other hand, it helps the person to recognize and rescue existing resources from its family basis, such as figures that represent emotional, material or even symbolic support – such as a heroic ancestor, for example – strengthening the grounding in the family.

Grounding in the community is another key dimension of grounding according to the CT model. The symbol adopted by Barreto for CT is the spider web. He adopted this symbol based on a ritual of the Tremembé Indians that dance to represent lessons learned from several animals. In order to live, the spider depends on the web she builds by herself. We may conceive the web as an important form of grounding that assures survival. Community Therapy is a model for the construction of "webs of ties" in the community. In addition to promoting the construction of solidarity relationships among participants during the sessions, habits such as trying to understand instead of judging, listening carefully and respecting differences, tend to be assimilated by the more regular attendants and spontaneously disseminated through their everyday relationships within the community. In Barreto's words (2005, 53): "(...) the group that listens ends up echoing what it heard. Those who have identified themselves may, at last, talk about what used to dwell inside them in silence. Listening arouses the desire for solidarity, awakens compassion, outlining the first steps towards the construction of a solidary community."

Cultural roots are always strengthened by CT sessions. Cultural anthropology states that identity is closely associated to culture. Who "I am" includes the clothes I wear, the food I eat, the songs and dances I know, the feasts, rituals, traditions and values of my ancestors. The loss of such references jeopardizes the self-esteem of migrants and produces a feeling of inadequacy and frailty. By opening room for cultural expressions – popular songs, sayings, stories and others – CT promotes the legitimation of the

cultural framework of each individual and of the community's cultural diversity. That is a very deep way of rescuing the roots, i. e., of "rooting in" or *grounding in culture*. Besides, it also teaches us to understand that differences are assets that expand the group's possibilities.

4.7 Generating Autonomy

In 1992, Lowen, (in Weigand 2006: 36) stated that, "for him the objective of bioenergetics psychotherapy was self-perception, self-expression and self-possession, that is, knowing oneself, expressing one's own truth and being our own boss".

Bioenergetic Analysis tries to deepen the person's awareness about her corporal and emotional reality and considers that being identified with the reality of one's own body is essential for the individual's health. BA also tries to rescue the expressive resources, especially the voice and the gestures, that were hampered along life, so that the person may be capable, not only of perceiving, but also of expressing what she feels in her relationships, in a true and appropriate manner. Lastly, Bioenergetics aims to encourage the autonomy of people. Working with limits, the expression of the "no", different forms of grounding and, during the process, strengthening the clients' confidence in their own feelings, their own perceptions and their own capacity to deal with life improves. Ideally speaking, we may consider that the client should be discharged from therapy when – being in contact with the truth of his feelings and aware of both, his limitations and his resources and potential – he takes responsibility for his process and takes his life into his own hands.

CT, as mentioned before, promotes the integration of the "community body", facilitating the processing of suffering and the establishment of bonds and developing *social network of solidarities*. By reaching beyond the unitary towards the communitary, CT does not intend to solve problems, but rather to highlight the community's own capacity to search for collective solutions for its impasses. By rescuing the knowledge and the competence deriving from the resilient process of overcoming adversities

and by acknowledging such knowledge within the community itself, CT looks beyond the shortages in order to highlight the competences, thus encouraging the feeling of self-confidence and self-responsibility. By leaving behind verticality in order to promote horizontal relationships, CT welcomes, acknowledges and supports those who are experiencing situations of suffering. The diversity of cultural experiences, know-how and roots that are present in groups and communities adds value and is then understood as wealth. Collective learning generates a dynamic of inclusion and empowerment in the community.

In their work with low income populations, *assistentialistic* models of intervention tend to position themselves as “saviors”, trying to bring pseudo-solutions from the outside to the inside, nurturing the idea and the feeling that the community is incapable of solving its own problems. We must overcome dependence-generating models that always require the presence of an expert, the “one who owns the knowledge”, that brings ready-made solutions to the population. Barreto (2005, 59) says:

“CT is a tool that allows us to build social networks of solidarity that promote life, and to mobilize the resources and competences of individuals, families and communities. We try to bring out the therapeutic dimension of the group itself, acknowledging the cultural heritage of our Indigenous, African, Oriental and European ancestors, as well as the knowledge produced by the experience of life itself.”

Another aspect that deserves to be highlighted with regard to the development of community autonomy is the training of *multipliers*. CT is not a model for indiscriminate use and requires capacity building and supervision. But it is a model that allows the capacity building of a very broad universe of people, including community leaders, even if they do not hold any degree. Communities in situation of risk are increasing at a high speed and we will never be capable of responding to such widespread and increasing demand in an efficient manner if we do not develop models that can be multiplied.

I already mentioned David Berceles’ work with traumatized populations. While dealing with the reality of communities that have been devastated by

disaster (civil war, earthquake, tsunami and others), he recognized that it was impossible to offer specialized treatment according to standard clinical models. He then prepared a sequence of well-structured and substantiated exercises that can be conducted by people from the community itself, without any academic training, who are selected and trained by him. Later on, he meets with these “multipliers” from time to time for supervision, clearing doubts that arise during their direct experience in applying the exercises with the groups they are conducting.

Levine (1999) also reports his experience with mothers and babies of neighboring groups that have been historically marked by wars and traumatizing confrontations. By drawing upon the children’s natural openness and curiosity and on child songs from the cultures involved, he created a rather simple and bond-generating dynamics, capable of being quickly assimilated by women in their own communities. According to Levine, “The beauty of this approach is its simplicity and efficacy. An external facilitator starts the process, leading the first group. Afterwards, some participating mothers can be trained as facilitators for the other groups. (...) Once they are trained, the mothers become the ambassadors of peace in their own communities” (Levine: 1999, 198).

Developing *solidarity support networks* and training *multipliers* are two essential factors for developing the autonomy of communities. If the intervention model being used **only** can be practiced by specialists with long years of training, it will be just another “colonizing” model, generating dependence, and reinforcing the inability of people to address their own problems.

Final Remarks

“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.” (“Walker, there is no path, the path is made by walking.”) – Antonio Machado (Spanish poet)

At the beginning of this paper I reported the difficulties I faced during an attempt to apply Bioenergetic Analysis resources to a group of rural workers. Through my encounter with the Community Therapy model and

the experience acquired along nine years working in peripheries and other exclusion contexts, I was able to assimilate concepts and forms of intervention that, from my point of view, can contribute to making Bioenergetic Analysis feasible as a model with a very broad social outreach.

In closing this paper I also want to encourage a growing number of therapists to find ways of acting in the context of diverse communities. The reality created by the accelerated growth of people in the peripheries of our cities, needs to be integrated into our professional practice. As we all know, acknowledging and dealing with reality is the only way to keep ourselves lucid instead of alienated, the essence of what we call *grounding*. Freud, Reich, Lowen and Pierrakos always started from practice and then developed their theories. We received such a valuable heritage! It is up to us to follow their examples, to continue expanding such knowledge, through direct experience of the reality provided by our own historic moment.

The Bioenergetic Analysis model has been contributing more and more to interventions in specific social groups. As a body-psychotherapy, it has potential for contributing in a trans-cultural way. Nevertheless, because it is centered mainly on the individual, its paradigm must be expanded in order for it to be applied in a much broader way. The Community Therapy model, with its trans-disciplinary perspective, helps us to devise new directions, both theoretically and technically, expanding our possibilities for working with wider systems.

Again, I wish to highlight the need to include the social and cultural dimensions into the conception of our interventions. As a consequence, we must always act in a way so as to promote the establishment and strengthening of bonds between people; as demonstrated, the web of emotional ties is the main vehicle for the integration of the “community body”.

Both Bioenergetic Analysis and Community Therapy promote the strengthening of people’s self-confidence and autonomy. I wish to reinforce that, with regard to working with communities, three elements are essential: the construction of *solidarity social networks* that create the means for individuals to find support in their own communities; the development of the resilience that opens the way for the group’s own therapeutic potential;

and the design of models that may be multiplied and conducted by members of that same community.

I'll conclude with the question that is often used for closing CT sessions: "What do I take with me today?" From where I stand now, I can say that working with communities has been extremely transforming for my personal and professional identity. I take with me the feeling of being more grounded in the world I live in, feeling more complete and fulfilled.

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Interesting links for anyone wanting to learn more about Community Therapy:

www.abratecom.org.br

www.4varas.com.br

www.mismecdf.org

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