Community

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Definition

The term community in the English language can be traced back to the 14th century and originates from the French word *comuneté* and the Latin word *communitatem*. In English the term initially came to denote five distinct senses. Community served as a distinction of the common people from those of rank (1), as a denotation of a state or organized society (2), the people of a district (3), as a designation for the community of shared interests (4) and as a sense of common identity and characteristics (5). In these early meanings of the term it is important to note the distinction between the designation of actual social groups on the one hand and the indication of a particular relational quality on the other.

The relational senses associated with the term community underwent a decisive transition beginning in the 17th century. This transition is important for the contemporary applications and uses of the term. In the distinction between community and society so famously codified by Ferdinand Toennies (1887), community increasingly came to be correlated with more direct, sentimental and parochial sets of relationships in contrast to the more formal, abstract and instrumental relationships of the state or society in its modern sense. From the 19th century onward, this notion of immediacy or locality of the term community became particularly prevalent in complex industrial societies. The complexity of the term community to this day, thus relates to the difficult interaction between the tendencies of direct common concern on the one hand and the materialization of various forms of common organization, which may or may not adequately express the former (Williams 1984).

Since Tocqueville, the local community has been viewed as a viable unit for social action and much of modern social sciences even views local communities (or neighborhoods) as a cure for the ills of contemporary society. However there is considerable variation in the different attempts to define and operationalize community. In part this variation is rooted in a basic confusion with regard to the distinction between the terms community and neighborhood. Akin to the early senses of the term, community is generally associated with certain kinds of relational qualities such as connectedness or shared interests and concerns. While these relationships are not inevitably bound to a spatial nexus, they may materialize in local organizations such as churches, associations or other community organizations. It is this form of communal connection among individuals, rooted in place or shared interests that presumably provides the foundation for some sort of group identity and collective action.

In contrast, neighborhood is an explicitly spatial concept referring to a geographical unit. But even as such it is often associated with relational properties as connectedness that are inherent in the term community, particularly in the urban context where the neighborhood is often considered the primary unit of solidarity and cohesion. It is this confusion between the terms community and neighborhood that lies at the center of the tension between notions of place-

based connectedness and the loss of immediate relationships under the impact of modernization, urbanization, migration, communication and technological advances that runs through the different classical conceptualizations of community (Chaskin 1997).

Main Issues
The perceived decline of traditional forms of immediate and sentimental ties and associations was a core concern of early sociologists who claimed that features such as size, heterogeneity, density and anonymity, characteristic of the modern metropolis undermined social relations, family life and intimate bonds between contemporary urbanites. But ethnographic research in the 50s and 60s compiled mounting evidence of dense social networks and a sense of local identity particularly in poor neighborhoods, challenging the pronounced loss of community. Particularly growing research on social networks revealed that despite the assumption of a decline in intimate, face-to-face ties, contemporary urbanites develop a variety of social relations that can be dispersed throughout space. Sociologists have defined this notion as "community of limited liability" which indicates that attachments to a local neighborhood are contingent and tend to be based on instrumental values and self-interests, tied to a rational investment rather than the sentimental ties that characterized the notion of "urban villages" of previous generations of urban sociologists (Chaskin 1997). Extending the idea of community of limited liability, Robert Sampson claims that despite such a contingent attachment, the local community remains essential to urban residents as a site for the realization of common values, in support of social goods, such as public safety, norms of civility and mutual trust and collective socialization of youth. Sampson argues that conflict may arise around distribution of resources and power, but that there is a general agreement on the content of these core values. Similar to the notion of social control, which is seen as the ability of actors to achieve beneficial outcomes through membership in social networks and structures, collective efficacy is defined as social cohesion among neighbors in combination with the willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good. Both are not properties inherent in any structure but rather the outcomes of sociability. Somewhat in the same vein, notions of social control are often described as the capacity of social groups or communities to self-regulate, which refers to normative standards and values against which an individual's behavior is deemed appropriate or deviant. Such an emphasis on self-regulation makes social control an inherent part of the structure and process of social groups or communities (Sampson 1999).

The idea of shared concerns, interests or norms and values, central to the various conceptions of community of interests reverberates in notions of community based on theories of local democracy. The degree to which interests are shared or conflict, is central to Jane Mansbrige's distinction between unitary and adversary democracy. When interests conflict, a democratic polity needs adversary institutions that is, institutions guided by the principle of majority rule. Based on the presupposition of conflicting interests, the majority rule has come to be understood as synonymous for democracy. In contrast, an alternative form of democracy assumes the existence of some sort of common interest. While it is recognized that citizens may initially have divergent interests, the notion of unitary democracy assumes that consensual decisions can be reached through a process of rational debate (Mansbridge 1983). Such communitarian notions of local democracy are often based on the presupposition that local bonds of friendship and community – reminiscent of the sentimental, parochial ties bemoaned by early sociologists - are built through the process of finding common solutions to problems. Therefore, community participation and local associations are presumed to build community, nurture cooperative behavior, nourish shared norms and transform local

institutions into more effective instruments of democracy by making them more responsive to the preferences of citizens. Such conceptualizations of community based on notions of local democracy are central to assumptions of increased flexibility and responsiveness of a decentralization and localization of public service delivery by providing the ability to tailor services more closely to specific local needs. This is reflected in various approaches such as "community policing", "community-based social services" or the "new communities programs".

Critical Placement and Perspectives
A critical issue in the recent resurgence of the term community in social welfare and urban policy centers on the central notions of shared interests, concerns, norms or values. Such presuppositions however raise important questions as to whether such shared interests actually exist in heterogeneous urban neighborhoods to the extent that they can serve as a legitimate and effective basis for local decision-making or social action. The communitarian ideal of community as a perceived alternative to the liberal individualism of contemporary society has further come under scrutiny because such an ideal of a face-to-face community of people who share the same values and life-styles fails to recognize the exclusive properties of such an ideal. Shared values, norms and life-styles may provide security for group members, but such an ideal of community can also operate to exclude or even oppress those that are perceived to deviate from this ideal.

Aside the various problems of adequately defining and operationalizing the subject, it is incredibly difficult to empirically measure the effects of community, or neighborhood on their residents or members. Rather, such a pronounced "re-discovery" of the local community, both as a cause and a solution to social, political and economic disadvantage re-defines inequality as a local problem, warranting a local response, thus shifting the focus away from macro-structural forces as causes for social exclusion and disadvantage. The true re-discovery in this process of re-definition is the fact that we can see a resurgence of the familiar conflation of notions of locality with notions of connectedness, social cohesion and community identity that have plagued the term from its early inception. Such a reconstruction of the causality of social problems is crucial for the politics of welfare provision because it legitimizes a very different set of policy responses. While targeted, community-based approaches to service delivery have been fairly established with regard to issues of crime and youth delinquency, the current transformation of welfare states suggests that top-down universal policies are increasingly replaced by bottom-up and locally negotiated programs backed by government support for local initiatives. Therefore this shift indicates a move beyond the classical distinction between geographical space and social space, where in the context of the post-welfare age community has become a vehicle increasingly employed and mobilized for the re-invention of government. Programs and policies emphasizing expectations for community cohesion and civic responsibility to combat social exclusion through local ownership and citizen-centered modes of service delivery are characteristic of a larger thrust of welfare policy where local particularity increasingly replaced centralized government control. Expectations and presuppositions for community cohesion and civic responsibility in poor communities in current policies raise important questions as to how welfare restructurings are facilitated through such a "re-discovery" of local community (Amin 2005).

Beyond the question as to whether such approaches will in the distant future be able to address the root causes of spatial inequality, de-centralization and localization of public services not only function to retrench welfare provisions, but effectively undermine the potential for political resistance by constraining the scope of conflict over public services and

the parties involved to a local and limited scale. Furthermore these approaches are saturated with a romantic notion of a presumed "golden age" of the parochial community of immediate, sentimental relationships that the term community was apparently never able to shed entirely.

References

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