Connected Communities

A review of conceptualisations and meanings of ‘community’ within and across research traditions: a meta-narrative approach

Marcello Bertotti, Farah Jamal, Angela Harden
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Executive Summary
Community is a contested concept that defies easy categorisation. We aimed to collect systematically the key ways in which community has been understood within and across research traditions. To do this, we used a meta-narrative methodology which attempts to unravel the ‘storylines’ of research. We identified a set of meta-narratives in sociology, anthropology and political theory. These ranged from pre-modern approaches to community as exemplified by the study of distant ‘others’ by early anthropologists to post-modern conceptualisations which emphasise new forms of commonality, difference and interaction in an era of globalisation and hypermodernity. We found considerable variability amongst the set of meta-narratives, particularly between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ communities, and the ongoing tension between individual and collective political positions in framing the importance of communities. The findings from this review provide a framework from which to think more insightfully about ‘community’. This framework could be used to facilitate a dialogue between academics and policy-makers on how different conceptualisations might translate into different types of interventions and might also help to guide decision-makers to consider their assumptions about community. Finally, we suggest some implications for future research around the use of an intersectional approach to study individuals’ belonging to different communities.
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Key words
Community; meta-narrative review; systematic review; sociology; anthropology; political theory; theories; concepts.
Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a review of the ways in which community has been understood from within and across academic disciplines and research traditions. We took a meta-narrative approach to the review in order to identify the major ways in which community has been conceptualised. A meta-narrative review is a new type of systematic review in which the aim is to identify the ‘storylines’ of research and the shared set of theories, concepts and preferred methods used by groups of scholars over time (1,2).

We began the review process with systematic searches across a range of bibliographic databases in the social sciences and related disciplines. Search results were screened and assessed according to discipline and relevance to the task in hand. In parallel, we held two consultation meetings, one with academics from different disciplines and one with policy-makers and practitioners with an interest in community. These meetings were used to identify further references and to begin charting different understandings of community. It became clear that the most relevant references appeared within sociology, anthropology and political theory, and these became our disciplines of focus for the review. Within each of these disciplines, seminal papers were identified and subjected to further analysis to examine their historical roots, philosophical underpinnings and chains of influence. This helped us to map the major storylines of the ways in which community has been understood across disciplines and over time. A final mixed policy and academic consultation meeting was held to share findings and check the robustness of our analysis.

In the sections that follow we outline each of the meta-narratives we identified, compare and contrast the different ways of understanding community within them, and outline some implications for future research and policy making.

The meta-narratives

We identified a set of meta-narratives that map how ways of understanding community have varied across disciplines and over time (table 1). The meta-narratives illustrate how community came to be understood in anthropology, sociology and political theory through tracing the key research traditions in these disciplines. The shifts in the meaning and conceptualisation of community have been shaped largely by the
Table 1. Ways of understanding community within and across disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta-narrative</th>
<th>Focus discipline (of most relevance)</th>
<th>Roots (historical and/or academic)</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Community conceptualised as</th>
<th>Key authors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commonality</strong></td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>Natural; primordial</td>
<td>Human society as a natural phenomenon and the study of human primitives i.e. studying distant ‘others’: villages, tribes, nomadic groups</td>
<td>Community formation depends upon homogeneity or commonality. Community was considered the location rather than the object of research.</td>
<td>Levi-Strauss (3); Turner (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The public sphere and formation of ‘community’</strong></td>
<td>Political theory</td>
<td>Aristotle; pre-modernity</td>
<td>Rather than emphasising who constitutes the state, Aristotle looks to the values and principles (which are formalised in a set of internal arrangements/ constitution) that characterise how people associate. Later scholars reconsider the role of the state and the influence of non-formal associations in sub-state spheres and civil society.</td>
<td>‘Community’ was first considered to be formed and sustained by values and principles that characterise associations between people in a state. Later, it was considered that people could come together in non-state domains to cooperate in common affairs.</td>
<td>Aristotle (5); Paine (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitionary perspectives on community</strong></td>
<td>Sociology; anthropology</td>
<td>Industrial revolution</td>
<td>Preoccupation with the transformations following the industrial revolution and its impact on traditional forms of association. (e.g. Tönnies: gemeinschaft/community to gesellschaft/society; Durkheim: mechanical to organic solidarity).</td>
<td>Community is moral, localised and intimate relationships – these no longer hold significance with emergence of ‘society’ (Tönnies); workforce specialisation requires interdependence and new forms of solidarity (Durkheim); industrialisation can negatively impact on traditional ways of life (Marx).</td>
<td>Tönnies (7); Durkheim (8); Marx (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community in urban life</strong></td>
<td>Sociology; anthropology</td>
<td>Human ecology; emergence of urban spaces; The Chicago School</td>
<td>Relationships in urban life are not based on proximity because of the nature of individual activity and living (e.g. transience, diversity). US urban areas are a problem (alienation, ethnic segregation), but also a solution (dynamism). The focus is on the complex urban space in shaping community rather than the family or village.</td>
<td>The idea of locality challenged with the rise of urban spaces. Community characterised as dense, diverse and transient. Emerging theories from the Chicago School include: e.g. urban ecology; concentric and transition zones; social disorganisation theory.</td>
<td>Park (10); Wirth (11); Redfield (12); Hannerz (13); Gans (14); Downey &amp; Smith (15)</td>
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<td>Community Studies</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Tönnies; network analysis; Chicago School</td>
<td>Focuses on the relationships between individuals (e.g. kinship, friendship, networks) in communities, rather than the household.</td>
<td>Community is primarily networks of solidarity between individuals rather than space or locality.</td>
<td>Crow &amp; Allan (16); Brint (17); Young &amp; Willmott (18); Arensberg (19); Bell &amp; Newby (20); Bulmer (21); Frankenberg (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating or mobilising community</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>1960s; community development; Marx</td>
<td>Urban development at this time looks to changing physical spaces, often at the expense of the poor. Alternatively, community mobilisation looks to providing ‘voice’ to marginalised people around common social concerns.</td>
<td>Community is an ‘ideal’ to be aspired to through collective action for the fulfilment of common interests. It is not a natural phenomenon, but a social construction.</td>
<td>Brent (23); Marx (24)</td>
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<td>Individualist and communitarian approaches to community</td>
<td>Political theory</td>
<td>John Rawls; theories of justice</td>
<td>The debate has focused on the critique that individualist/liberal theory neglects the primacy of social relations.</td>
<td>Communitarians consider community to be a source of identity formation. Two popular branches of scholars in the communitarian tradition are orthodox and radical, where the former emphasises the necessity of a single community and the latter considers the existence of multiple communities while still looking to issues of membership, commonality and solidarity.</td>
<td>Rawls (25); Sandel (26, 27); MacIntyre (28, 29); Etzioni (30, 31); Jordan (32, 33); Gray (34); Frazer (35, 36)</td>
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<td><strong>Symbolic approaches</strong></td>
<td>Sociology; anthropology</td>
<td>Durkheim and Weber; Anderson: no academic root</td>
<td>Separates ideas and meanings of community attributed by individuals from community as a form of bodily interaction. Face to face communication is not necessary to establish community. Community is a relational concept. It is determined by defining who is in and who is out.</td>
<td>Communities are constructs built on sentiments and symbols (in the minds or imaginings of members).</td>
<td>Cohen (37); Anderson (38); Barth (39); Bourdieu (40)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Market economy perspectives on community</strong></td>
<td>Political theory; sociology</td>
<td>Rise of market economies; communitarianism: political economy</td>
<td>Links social and economic structures to political discourse on community. A strong trend in this tradition has been to look at the role of communities in establishing trust in society.</td>
<td>Communities are not normative, nor an ideal to be aspired to in their own right but are promoted for the economic advantages that they are supposed to produce (through social capital, trust). On the other hand, communities are also threatened by the operation of market economies.</td>
<td>Fukuyama (41, 42); Putnam (43, 44); Gorz (45)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Globally oriented approaches</strong></td>
<td>Sociology; anthropology</td>
<td>Hyper-modernity; globalisation</td>
<td>New forms of interaction and commonality/difference are explored in an era of globalisation and communication advances.</td>
<td>From local to transnational flows. Community is discussed in the context of identity, and place and centrality of geography and location are challenged. Concept of ‘thin’ communities (e.g. weak ties over the internet) and ‘thick’ communities based on strong ties.</td>
<td>Auge (46); Olwig &amp; Hastrup (47); Appadurai (48); Gupta &amp; Ferguson (49)</td>
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emergence of the state, industrialisation, urbanism and more recently, globalisation and communication advances. It appears, therefore, that new ways of understanding community roughly tend to unfold in reaction to historical developments in political, social, cultural and economic life.

In pre-modernity, early anthropologists emphasised the collective as the setting of social life. They tended to study villages, tribes and distant ‘others’ that were considered to be culturally and socially homogeneous communities (50). Community was assumed to exist and was not yet considered a question for investigation. It was only much later that anthropologists would consider community to be the most important subject matter in the discipline. In contrast, scholarly work on community in political theory can be traced to the rise of liberalism, where ideas of freedom, rights and justice and their political and social context were heavily theorised. Notably, scholars studied the role of the state (Aristotle), and the role of civil society and non-state domains (e.g. Rousseau, Paine) in shaping relationships.

The explicit theorisation of community began with advances in industrialisation in the twentieth century, when the seminal group of scholars, Tönnies, Durkheim and Marx, began to consider the impact of the modern environment on traditional or rural forms of life (51). Tönnies, Durkheim and Marx, began to consider the impact of the modern environment on traditional or rural forms of life. For example, Tönnies suggests that community is characterized as rural, moral and intimate, while society in the modern era is individualistic, instrumental and impersonal. For Durkheim, individuals move towards ‘organic solidarity’ in modernity where the specialization of work leads to a necessary interdependence between people. Marx criticised the alienation that was derived from production in capitalism.

Increasing modernity gave rise to urbanism in the 1920s/30s, which ignited new questions about community for anthropologists and sociologists within the ‘community and urban life’ meta-narrative. Cities were considered to represent unique social and cultural spaces that play a role in the shifting of how human organisation functions. Community in these urban spaces were considered to be dense, diverse and transient. Therefore, the idea of locality and the importance of proximity from earlier conceptualisations of community were strongly challenged in this tradition. The Chicago School guided research in this area and developed new theories of community in the context of the modern environment (see table 1).

In the 1960s, the community studies tradition developed by both building on and critiquing the emphasis that many urban anthropologists/sociologists put on space as the unit of analysis. This tradition is concerned with studying all types of relationships outside the household and has a particular focus on researching social issues. The community studies tradition led to a substantial growth in empirical studies primarily based on case studies and participant observation, stimulating a more interpretive approach. Closely related to community studies is the idea of ‘generating or mobilising community’, which developed to some extent in reaction to urban development ignoring the social concerns of the poor. Community for this tradition is considered to be an ideal
to be aspired to through collective action for the fulfilment of common interests. It particularly looks to provide a ‘voice’ to marginalised people around social concerns.

Community in political theory returned as a central question with the rise of debates between individualists and communitarians. Individualists are concerned with moral worth and the importance of the individual. Communitarians emphasise human associations as the source of identity formation, and thus the idea of a community becomes important for human organisation and behaviour. More ‘radical’ strands of communitarianism consider the existence of multiple forms of community, attaching importance to ideas of membership and solidarity while still accounting for changing socio-economic factors. The increasing impact of market economies on modern environments evoked another tradition that linked political economy with communitarian relations. A strong trend in this tradition has been the examination of the role of communities in establishing trust and from that, ‘social capital’ in societies. Communities, for these scholars, are promoted for the economic and political advantages that they can produce.

More recently, the importance of embodied interaction as an important requisite for community was challenged by scholars, who were instead focussed on the way in which ‘world of meaning’, imaginings and sentiments function in modern societies to construct ideas of community and cooperation, thus separating the idea of community from interaction. Whilst previous traditions focussed their analysis on groups and interactions between individuals, this meta-narrative is more interested in what occurs inside the individual. This is evident in symbolic, imagined communities but also in more recent work on belonging, attachment and affect which appear to combine sociology and psychology to study community.

Arguably, we have now entered an era of post-modernity characterised by super-diversity, globalisation and new ways of communication. In this context, researchers across disciplines have challenged the centrality of geography in the research on community. Scholars look to issues of identity in the context of technology, mass migration and diversity and how this, if at all, relates to place in the study of community (52).

Implications for future research

This review has highlighted the multi-faceted nature of community across disciplines over time. Several implications for research and policy emerge from our review and from the feedback from the consultation meetings we held with academic and policy experts.

We found a fundamental gap between the conceptualisations of community in the academic literature and the way in which community is used in policy and practice. In the latter, the notion of community is often taken for granted and associated with geographical space. In contrast, in the theoretical literature, community is often expressed in an abstract manner, making it difficult to apply concepts practically. Our set
of meta-narratives could be used to facilitate a dialogue between academics and policy-makers on how different ways of conceptualising communities might translate into different ways of implementing, for example, interventions to build community resilience. It could also be used to help decision-makers to think about what assumptions they are making about communities and expose them to alternative ways of understanding communities.

In this context, a useful extension of our review would be to develop a toolkit for the identification of the different characteristics of a community that could be used in assisting the design of policies and practical interventions. However, prior to this, the empirical literature on communities would need to be drawn upon and combined with the findings of the current review, which focused mainly on the conceptual literature. This could include, for instance, the empirical work on social capital in crime, health and other domains of public policy; research on social support and social networks from within community and health psychology (53); and research which examines the perspectives of members of communities themselves on how they define and value communities.

Our set of meta-narratives also suggest that individuals can be conceptualised as belonging to a variety of communities at the same time, thanks to a range of embodied and imagined connections with other individuals. These multiple forms of belonging raise interesting research questions, such as, ‘How do individuals belonging to different types of community influence each other?’ and ‘What happens at the intersection of belonging to different communities?’ Intersectional analysis from within feminist theory exposes what happens at the intersection between class, gender, age and other characteristics of women’s identities (54). Methodological and conceptual work from this tradition could be applied more generally to answer the questions above and thus provide a useful new way of understanding communities.


References


**External links**

For further information about the following:

- **Methodology** (meta-narrative approach to systematic review);
- **Diagram flow** of the development of meta-narratives over time.
- **Fuller version of each meta-narrative**

please click on the following link:

[http://www.uel.ac.uk/ihhd/projects/Meaningsofcommunity.htm](http://www.uel.ac.uk/ihhd/projects/Meaningsofcommunity.htm)
**The Connected Communities**

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

> “to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

[www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)