

# Connected Communities

## Concepts and meanings of community in the social sciences

### Discussion Paper

Valerie Walkerdine and David Studdert



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#### **Executive Summary**

The project 'Concepts and meanings of community in the social sciences' undertook to produce a conceptual review, linking theoretical underpinnings with the usage of the concepts of community in empirical research and describing the manner in which these conceptualisations appear in government and non-government sector policies and practices. The review mapped key academic texts across 9 disciplines and fields since the 1960s. It reviewed the ways in which key conceptualizations appeared in empirical articles within these fields and disciplines and also appeared within government, NGO and voluntary sector websites, where community was an explicit aspect of the **organisation's brief. The review showed that while there is a sophisticated history of debate and investigation within a few key disciplines, there has been a paucity of concepts used within empirical research, applied fields and policy websites. The impact of this is to make community into a 'spray-on term', in which there is little reference to concepts but in which implicit meanings emphasize the significance of community as an object and downplay the importance of social relations and experience. The implications of this for research, policy and practice are profound: we badly need research which allows community as action to be conceptualized in ways which understand and thus support action by community members, central to the localism agenda.**

#### **Researchers and Project Partners**

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#### **Key words**

community, concepts, meanings, social sciences

# Introduction

## Review

The conceptualization of community is usually taken as beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when concern about the effects of social cohesion related to the social displacement following industrialization was at its height.

Sociology, anthropology and social psychology have the most developed history in the social sciences, but thinking has fluctuated over time, with debates about the usefulness of the term itself and concerns about shifts from contained geographical locations where kinship ties keep people together, through to the symbolic ties that bind them and more recently to the interest ties that bring people together even if geographically distant.

## Disciplines and fields

In understanding the contributions of disciplines and fields within the social sciences, the disciplines have supplied concepts, while the fields generally offer meanings derived from the disciplines in their applied work. We considered five disciplines: anthropology, geography, cultural studies, social psychology and sociology. Anthropology is the key social science discipline for understanding community, with work from the Chicago School and structural functionalism dominating the period up to the 1960s, but this came under sustained attack from the 1970s onwards by a turn to the symbolic and discursive (Cohen, 1985; Anderson, 1983; Basch et al, 1994; Hannerz, 1996). The implications of this were to downplay the importance of face-to-face interaction and to emphasize the centrality of community of interest, in which community functions simply as a referent (Amit and Rapport, 2002).

Where anthropology has stressed the centrality of meanings, we might also point to feelings in common, as conceptualized within social psychology (Sarason, 1974; Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2010) and how those are generated by actions in common across a range of interrelated fields – which stress the centrality of a feeling of belonging, exclusion, the possibility of going on being. From sociological conceptualizations, we learn about the centrality of two well-known American concepts – social capital and communitarianism. In the wider historical context, both can be seen as modifications of Structural Functionalism. In the last thirty years Cultural studies has provided the social sciences with much of the underlying thematic approaches, particularly in relation to subjectivity and community of interest. Conversely, Geography tends to adapt its notions of community from other disciplines, particularly sociology and anthropology.

One of the most important distinctions made is between community as an object and community as action, activity, process. The former is most obvious in sociological work, especially social capital and communitarianism, whereas community as activity and process is much more common within anthropology and social psychology.

Fields:

Education

Health

Online communities

Community studies

Policing

If we take all these applied fields together, there is a massive amount of academic work but in most of it community functions as a referent, which relates strongly to either location or interest. In particular, concepts from social capital and communitarianism are applied to these fields, except for some recent work in policing (Hughes, 2007) which acknowledges that community meanings and the state may not be synonymous. In most of the work, the term community functions **as what Rose (1999) described as a 'feel good' term.**

#### Policy documents and websites

The websites and materials reviewed overwhelmingly operate with certain key terms: community development, empowerment, engagement and participation, with an emphasis on active participation. Members of communities are often addressed as citizens or the public, terms which have a different historical meaning from the term community, thus rather undercutting the initial appeal to community. Above all, activities which relate to empowerment and participation are about supporting communities to be able to take part in the decision-making of the local governance infrastructure, to be able to express their needs and demands and to be able to challenge where necessary. This is understood as especially supporting and enabling those in marginalized groups and communities to take part.

It is sometimes acknowledged that a community has many different facets, and that people belong to different communities at once, such as location, plus faith plus other interest. Thus, the definition of community, while primarily about a bounded geographical area (often a local authority), does operate with a nuanced view of constituency. Where conceptual apparatuses are referred to, this is usually a reference to Social Capital.

#### Policy and practice workshop

**As part of the project's dissemination activities, a one-day workshop brought together policy makers, community activists and the project academic advisory group.**

A number of key issues emerged from this discussion:

1. A strong distinction needs to be made between policy that relates to the implementation of a political agenda and community activism undertaken by voluntary groups, which tends to operate on an asset-based approach, which uses a framework of listening what a locality wants.
2. There is a real problem for academic research in relation to partnerships with policy and grass roots organizations, in terms of timescale. Academic research takes a long time to get funded and to be undertaken. This does not fit well with an agenda that demands rapid response and change. It is therefore a challenge to think about how researchers and policy makers and practitioners can fruitfully work together for mutual gain.
3. While there may be implicit references to key theories such as social capital and communitarianism within policy and practice literature, the constraints are twofold: having to operate to a political agenda, fixed in manifesto commitments and having to respond on the ground to that agenda as the starting point for thinking about what is being demanded by the community concerned.

### Discussion

The review demonstrates that the term Community has many meanings in the literature but little concrete presence. As such, the term continues to be used, not because of its usefulness to academics, but because of its continued resonance with policymakers and the public.

We discovered in the applied fields and the stake-holder websites that community was rarely conceptualised and was often established as a fact through the use of very **traditional social science descriptors like 'location' and 'interest', often utilised in a reductionist manner as a given which required no further engagement.** In the theoretical work, community was frequently discussed, yet books, chapters and papers followed a familiar groove, in which the past failure of attempts to define it and the general failure **of structural functionalism, were presented as the final word, justifying the term's** confused and unhelpful status.

Typically, following a dedicated chapter or section, the word community would feature throughout the pages following, in whatever meaning resonated in that particular context or in whatever form supported the argument at the time. In short, there were a lot of critiques of previous work, but little attempt to offer or even to think about possible alternative conceptualisations. Indeed this lack of definition is endemic across the literature: communitarians for instance are famous for never defining community while **constantly evoking it (Rasmussen, 1990), while derivative concepts like 'social cohesion' are also never defined or conceptualised.**

It is surely a sign of some sort of conceptual gridlock when a term is constantly interrogated but never engaged. Of course there are some notable exceptions – the work in social psychology and anthropology was both challenging and innovative. However, it stood out because such engagement was barely visible across any of the remaining disciplines and fields.

So the question that haunts this review is why? Why has it come to this point where a term once central has now so little purchase in the social sciences that in the majority of cases the word itself appears as somewhat of an embarrassment?

From the overall view of these disciplines, the key moment in the development of the contemporary Social Science approach to community and the key element in grasping the reasons for the current conceptual grid-lock is to be found in the years around the **70/80's, years which saw the** decline of both meta-narratives which had occupied the 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual thought – traditional liberalism and Marxism and the rise of post-foundational approaches.

Within the Social Sciences this period marked the shift from structural functionalism, which, in various guises, had dominated the social science engagement with Community.

Since the mid 80s, and in the context of rising policy and political concerns about the decline of community, two distinct strands of thought can be discerned – on one side are **the 'lite' versions of functionalism, works heavily grounded in the legacy of liberal** progressive thought and liberalism, principally Social Capital (Portes, 2000), which dominates the field, Communitarian thought and variants on liberalism (Rawls (1971).

**The second post 1980's strand centres around the general notion of imaginary** communities – the symbolic domain of community, first introduced through the work of Anderson (1983) and Cohen (1985).

Of course there are many similarities between these two strands, particularly in the meanings and framings of community. However, it is important to explore, before we examine these similarities, what is missing from both these two strands. The failure of functionalism and its eclipse as a defining umbrella for community thinking represented a definitive shift away from the face-to-face investigation of communal activities as the basis for understanding community and communal meanings (Aull Davies and Jones, 2003, Hughes, 2007). Further for all its conceptual faults Structural Functionalism **tended to view the community as an 'organic whole'.**

As a result it is precisely face-to-face being-ness taken in its widest sense, as linkages, actions, speech, affect, practices, grounded in communal interaction, which is consistently absent from the social science literature and there is a strong sense, at least from social capital, of community as something broken, rather than an activity which is always present.

The effect of this retreat from a holistic approach to community is that typically, current theorisation splits communal being-ness in parts: parts useful for policing; parts useful for the delivery of health information or improved treatment; or community as interest without location; or community as a space without context, which marks the applied work. Yet at the same time, it lacks the conceptual means to integrate them or to utilise this applied work for wider comparative purposes.

For policy makers, this lack of a holistic view of community is also an issue., not least because the stated goal of much community intervention - social cohesion- can never be defined or modelled, nor can there be any real assessment of results derived from interventions.

Such a goal will remain simply an ideal primarily because the wider communal context is precisely what is lacking from these investigations and the prior agendas adopted simply do not amount to an investigation of communal being-ness. This makes the targeting of interventions and the evaluation of results almost impossible for government policies designed to achieve communal regeneration, social cohesion, leaving the terms as slogans and empty rhetoric (Hughes, 2007, p24).

In far too much of the work reviewed, the whole context of particular communities was excluded – the good capital is not integrated with the bad in theory or in practice; community of interest was not integrated with community of location. The result was a vast array of applied and conceptual work in which communities are either too macro or too demarcated for the results to be of much assistance to policy makers.

It could be argued that it is precisely those parts of communality that have been excluded by the shifts within the social sciences from the 1980s that are crucial to understand. To be more precise, it is the incapacity to locate communal being-ness as an outcome of **all** actions of communal sociality that limits these studies to the descriptive and the partial. Acknowledging the existence of multiple communities of varied sizes has little practical meaning without the investigation of how this co-exists at a micro level.

#### Recommendations for future research

In making the above argument about the state of social science conceptualisation of community, we are mindful of the need to develop work which fits the present social, economic and political climate and relates to the needs of policy and practice. We argue that the approaches which stress the complexity of face-to-face sociality urgently need to be developed. Our review shows us that policy makers are resorting to the use of certain key terms, such as community development, empowerment, engagement and participation. Above all, activities which relate to empowerment and participation are about supporting communities to be able to take part in the decision-making of the local governance infrastructure, to be able to express their needs and demands and to be able to challenge where necessary. This is understood as especially supporting and enabling those in marginalized groups and communities to take part.

Thus, we propose that the amplification and extension of work on communal being-ness is desperately needed if the social sciences is to respond in any useful way to the concerns of policy makers in the present political climate, especially with respect to the new localism agenda. If we start at this point, we would have a much more subtle and nuanced view of what community is. We believe that our approach goes further than simply asking people what they need, although this of course is a valuable first step. We seek to find how the community works now, as a whole, not just what individuals think that a community requires. We need to understand something about the internal workings of the community, which may not be obvious to members of communities themselves. We argue that we do not need a pre-emptive perspective but a way of understanding and exploring how communing, communal being-ness, works in that particular location. This requires both sustained conceptual and empirical work. We argue that such a way forward is urgently needed in order for the social sciences, policy makers and practitioners to be able to have an engagement with a pressing social agenda.



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## Further information

For a longer academic report, a report for policy makers and journals articles, please see the project website:

<http://conceptualisingcommunity.wordpress.com/>

## 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)

