

Connected Communities

Conceptualising community as
a social fix, argument and
persuasion in health, housing
and local governance

Dr Leila Hamalainen and Dr Kathryn Jones



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Executive Summary

Community is a politically contested concept (Finlayson, 2007: 551). Often described as an empty concept with so many meanings, it has been stretched beyond any real usefulness (Hillery, 1955). Our review describes the shape of; and tensions within; the **contestations existing around 'community' as a 'fix' for complex social problems in the UK, since the 1960s.** The focus was on undertaking a rhetorical discourse analysis of local policy in health, housing and local governance written in connection to poverty in the East Midlands. We found that policy-makers were able to define their own definitions of **'community' out of the nexus between traditions, individual beliefs and dilemmas.** However, the policy areas of health, housing and local governance did not appear to be a **key determinant of constructions of 'community' over time. Instead, definitions were mediated by two factors, that of party ideology and bureaucratic managerialism, in that accounts of 'community' are defined locally along party lines, and in spite of local interpretations,** the bureaucratic-spatial construct of community is ever present. It is this latter definition that seems to dominate in the lives of practitioners and in effect **constrains their ability to influence the definition of 'community' in practices.**

Researchers and Project Partners

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People from the following organisations attended the practitioner event: Derby City Council; Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership; Leicester City Council; Leicestershire County Council; LeicesterShire Learning Networks; Ley Group Young **People's Project; MENCAP; NAVCA; Near Neighbours Development, St Philips Centre;** Office for Civil Society Cabinet Office (East Midlands); Shelter Housing Aid and **Research Project; SISO; Voluntary Action Leicester; Workers' Educational Association.** Academic Expert Advisory Group: Dr Jo Richardson, Dr Tim Brown, Dr Steven Griggs, Professor Rob Baggott, Professor Colin Copus (De Montfort University).

Key words

Community, Contestation, Discourse, Health, Housing, Local Governance, Poverty, Rhetoric

Introduction

Community is a politically contested concept (Finlayson, 2007: 551). Often described as a concept with so many meanings, it has been stretched beyond usefulness (Hillery, 1955). Our review describes the shape of; and tensions **within; the contestations around 'community' as a 'fix' for complex social** problems in the UK, since the 1960s. We examined the use of community in relation to the problem of poverty, focusing on the policy literatures in health, housing and local governance. In addition, we contrasted policy/official definitions with usage among practitioners. Our problem-driven research connects different policy literatures, time periods, national and local discourses across policy documents, and practices. This provides an overview of the evolution of 'community' as it has been politically defined vis-a-vis poverty; **an analysis of the 'ownership' of the concept under different** conditions and within different policies; and an analysis of the usefulness of **'community' as a concept for empowerment, when understood in relation to** rhetorical discourse.

Methods

The project had three overlapping phases. The first: a literature search of **constructions of 'community' across three policy areas in the UK since the** 1960s (Appendix 1); produced hermeneutical accounts to underpin policy analysis in phase two (Appendix 2). **Recognising that 'community' is socially** constructed, we used rhetorical discourse analysis (RDA) to understand negotiation and contestation in local policy documents (Finlayson, 2007). We focussed on documents published in the East Midlands, and policy-makers, who are an important voice in constructions (Alexander, 2004) (Appendix 3). The final phase involved focus groups with practitioners based in the East Midlands to explore the resonance of our findings (Appendix 4).

For access to all appendices listed referred to in the text, see External Links (page 13).

Findings

Summary of hermeneutical tradition of community and poverty

Appendix 5 summarises how community and poverty has been linked and understood by national governments since the 1960s. Overall, community has been defined spatially (Lupton and Turok, 2004). Interest-based communities were noted from the 1970s, and communities of identity from the 1980s, both with more frequency from the New Labour period. Communities as a network became prominent under New Labour (within partnerships). Across different eras different ways of thinking about poverty have dominated, although the assumption of poverty as an individual/moral failing was a feature throughout time periods. What has changed is the emphasis on the differential role of the state; business; the community/voluntary sector; and local residents in dealing with poverty. Four key problem-frames were identified. These are not mutually exclusive, and in some eras more than one frame dominated.

- **Community and the welfare state:** found across all time periods. The question of community-state relations and in particular where the boundary between private and public should lie, to protect the material and economic welfare of citizens. For example, Hoggett argues that by the mid-1980s '*community became a metaphor for the absence or withdrawal of the state*' (in Raco and Imrie, 2003: 12).
- **Community and social development:** the genesis and evolution of community development work and the idea of urban development, particularly in the context of de-industrialisation, the displacement of populations from inner cities and concerns about new immigrants. For example, the 1970s Community Development Programme (CDP) belief was that '*community malfunctioning could be tackled from within*' (Loney, 1983: 60). This frame was found in the 1970s and in the late-1990s.
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- **Community and the common-good:** how should community be engaged in decision-making and how does democracy achieve the common-good? Within this frame there is the subtext of a power struggle between local and national government. John (2009: 20), argued that community participation '*emerged from within local public agencies as well as being imposed by central government*'. This frame is prevalent from the New Labour era.
- **Community and control:** how can democracy and effective governing be ensured? Springings and Allen (2005: 294) suggest in this context: '*community is promoted because it is seen to consist of well-functioning social relationships that are underpinned by a sense of mutual obligation and responsibility*'. The frame is particularly prevalent from New Labour's era onwards.

The analysis of local policy suggests that **areas "picked and mixed" from these four problem-frames** in their construction of the problem and solution (Appendix 6). This enabled them to construct a narrative that was linked to their own interpretation and definition of community. Different facets of these frames were drawn on at different times, for example the welfare state **problem-frame was used to both support local government's role in regeneration and to advocate a stronger role for private and voluntary/community sectors**. Throughout though, the definition of community was predominately spatial and urban. A number of implications arise from these choices:

Practitioners agreed that definitions of community centred on the spatial, and **suggested this was linked to the perceived 'golden-age' of community in rural areas**. They problematised the bureaucratic requirement for geographically-bounded areas, arguing that in cities, community was often linked more to interest/identity than location. In addition, they questioned the assumption of '**community**' when the decision to belong is an individual choice.

Poverty and Community in Health, Housing and Local Governance

Within our given policy areas and time frame, policy has focused on intervening in spatial communities. Even where communities of interest and identity were acknowledged, mainly from the 1990s onwards first in health, then in housing and local governance, this has generally occurred within a spatial area.

- **Health** was concerned with inequality, social alienation and poverty. Inequality is linked to access to services. Later, issues such as obesity and alcohol consumption are linked to lifestyle. Community-based initiatives focused on participation and health promotion to reduce inequality (particularly from New Labour era) and promote social wellbeing. (Jewkes and Murcott, 1998; Bridgen, 2006; Kearns et al, 2009; Somerville, 2010)
- **Housing** social alienation and poverty are linked to the political economy of housing (housing mix, tenure and management). Community-based initiatives have focused on issues concerning regeneration, participation (in planning and residents associations) and sustainable communities (linked to social and tenure mix). (Damer and Hague, 1971; Cole and Goodchild, 2000; Lupton, 2009; Somerville, 2010)
- **Local governance** was mostly concerned with social alienation. Community-based initiatives have focused on responsibility, participation, empowerment and regeneration and issues relating to community management (community cohesion and citizen engagement). (Imrie and Raco, 2003; Barnes et al. 2007, John, 2009; Wallace, 2010)

Practitioners agreed that health and housing interventions focused on spatial areas. Housing was linked to issues of political economy (particularly regarding tenure). Local governance focused on involvement and participation, and tensions between local and national government.

Local interpretations of 'Community' over time

The analysis of policy showed that different cities interpreted 'community' in different ways (Appendix 7):

- **Leicester** focused on ethnic harmony - there was a strong group-based sense of community, although linked to spatial areas.
- **Nottingham** focused on a return to the 'golden-age' of community (e.g. by creating an urban village) building social capital at grassroots level, through a local neighbourhood identity.
- **Derby** focused on building a community of citizens, as individual economic actors. Specific needs groups or spatial areas were linked to this overarching emphasis.
- **Leicestershire** general definitions were harder to discern at county level. Rural idyll positives were to be extended where possible. A bureaucratic and managerial definition was dominant.

Practitioners from Leicester and Derby confirmed these local definitions, but suggested that Derby was now concentrating more on participation. In Leicester, the focus on communities of faith/ethnicity was welcomed, but practitioners cautioned that in areas where people "*don't celebrate multiculturalism*" (FG3) (mainly white, working-class 'islands') residents feel their identity is ignored and hanker after a 'lost community'. Practitioners from the county agreed that Leicestershire to an extent reflects the rural idyll.

Exploring sources of contestation and 'ownership'

Our research sought to identify contentious periods, when local and national definitions of 'community' and poverty were not only clearly distinct from each other but when tensions were also apparent, and asked how these periods can be further explained.

Local-national government contestation

Our cross-cutting analysis (Appendix 8) found that local 'ownership' of the agenda was not specifically related to the three policy areas, or the transitional periods at the end of one national government and the start of a new one when definitions at the national level were in flux (Arendt, 1977). Contestation appeared to be most likely/possible when the national governing party was at odds with the local.

To what extent this may have represented the forging of a coalition with the local populace or an ideological dispute between national and local parties, will be discussed in the next section. However our analysis on the nature of contestation suggests that it was more about party ideological differences than about any local cultural definition of community. The period in the late-1980s also reveals noticeable tension between local and national government around their area of competency and control, in the light of the Thatcher **government's attempt to politically discredit local government (see LCC, 1988).**

The only exception to this, was the 1970s CDP Coventry¹ document that challenged the basis of official understandings around community and poverty, not only in Coventry but across many of the CDP projects. The difference with this programme was that CDP was an action research project conducted by academics in partnership with community workers and local authority representatives. It was also produced at a time of great political instability.

Practitioners did perceive an organisational difference in approach, as much as an ideological one, when working with different parties: ***"Conservatives leave us alone and in that sense are easier to work with, Labour always require you to go to lots of meetings, committees. Harder to do things..."*** (FG3).

¹ Coventry CDP (Benington, 1975a,b) was selected since CDP was an important national programme at this time, did not take place in the East Midlands. Coventry was the nearest comparable location.

Practitioner-government tension

The practitioner event identified areas of tension between practice and policy:

- 'Communities of need' (such as teenage mothers, the homeless, asylum seekers) who may not have a shared interest, require spatial-institutional recognition to ensure support.
- The distinction between generational problems of poverty in some areas (versus) poverty in transient areas, where poor incomers will move to, and then move on once they have developed capacity.
- Bureaucratic definitions of need can cause conflict and division as people in one area may be seen to benefit at the expense of others.
- Community activity can be exclusionary e.g. when local residents come together to protest against assisted housing for the homeless.
- Individuals need positive experiences to appreciate the possibilities of community (ethical sense).
- Policy is written **according to 'the rules of the game'**. Communities may not recognise themselves in policy documents, but attracting funding gives practitioners scope to implement their own agenda.
- Building partnerships of trust between local authorities and residents takes time, and in the current economic climate, this is problematic.
- Local policy-makers can lack power (e.g. resources) to deliver what communities want, and therefore may be seen to reflect national rather than local agendas.

Rhetoric and Persuasion

Across all periods, the constructions of arguments about 'community' and poverty were similar. The problems of local areas are identified and claims made about their cause, effect and resolution.

- **Rhetorical Approach:** deliberative rhetoric dominated, although when referring to problems such as health inequalities or moral failing, epideictic rhetoric was drawn on. Forensic rhetoric was limited (but see GNP, 1999). All documents sought to display the **author's** ethos and character (expertise and experience). This reifies power relationships when defining the problem.

- **Language:** earlier documents adopted more formal language and prose, with later documents more likely to draw on pathos to support claims. For example, in the welfare state problem-frame, earlier documents were more bureaucratic/technical in tone while documents from the 1990s onwards adopted more business metaphors/language to persuade the reader.
- **Style:** development of desk-top publishing was reflected in the changing style of documents, with more pictures/graphics and less text in later documents. From the 1980s onwards, policy-makers increasingly used **branding to provide an 'identity' for the plans, and in some instances the local area.** This branding has a unifying effect (e.g. Derwent: Proud and Positive, DCP, 2001).
- **Community Voice:** despite evidence of a deliberative approach in the development of plans, there was little evidence of direct community voice. While documents referred to community participation (particularly from City Challenge onwards), this was mediated by the author. Even where significant consultation was noted (GNP, 1999; DCP, 2001) there was no explicit reporting of the outcome. Few documents contained quotes from local residents, and where they were they mainly supported claims.
- **Role of Author:** The roles adopted by the authors were influenced by the hermeneutical and party tradition they were situated within, and the dominant way that community was defined in a locality. For example, the 1960s Bulwell document, casts the local authority in an expert role when the welfare state was still largely intact; the role of educator was emphasised in **Leicester's** Inner Area Programme (LIAP) (LCC, 1979) under a Labour local government, while (LCC, 1988) and LCC (1992) both show the local authority as representing/leading the community for slightly different reasons (the local-national power struggle and unifying ethnic communities).

- **Evidence:** Evidence to support the author's claims were related to the particular policy area and the scale of the initiative. In line with general policy-making trends, there is a time-specific preference for certain types of evidence. In earlier documents around small-scale neighbourhood regeneration, plans and photographs dominate; while in higher-level visioning documents the quoting of large-scale statistics was preferred. In later documents the scale of these statistics is more local than national in focus, but they are still dominant. This fits with the focus on governance rather than government. Where there are areas of contestation between national and local government the use of official reports to question national assumptions is prevalent. Local voices are rarely used as a way of questioning the assumptions made by government (see Benington, 1975a,b as an exception).

Practitioners argued that the bureaucratic way of defining communities could have negative connotations, for example, the use of postcodes by gangs to define their area. The language used to describe communities could backfire: *"a lot of people get angry when negative words are applied to their community, they don't want to be defined in that way"* (FG3). They criticised policy-makers for not wanting to hear the voice of the poor on their own terms; they were too focused on ticking boxes than reflecting the values of local areas, as 'community building' was often too output driven. Consultation processes were criticised for being narrowly defined where the implications of **decisions weren't** always established. The use of consultants to deliver plans could mean local knowledge and voices were lost.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our research was problem-driven but has several implications for academia. We considered whether the policy areas of health, housing and local governance in effect defined the nature of constructions of **'community'** and did not find this to be the case. This raises questions about the significance of policy networks (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992) to an analysis of state dependency and the ability of actors to rationally respond to the needs of the policy institutions around them in order to define the direction of history (Hay and Wincott, 1998).

The differences that we identified at the local level guide us towards a decentred account of policy (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003), where particular cities **are able to define their own definitions of 'community' out of the nexus** between traditions, individual beliefs and dilemmas. This account does not however reveal the whole story. The power of individuals in our account is mediated by two factors: party ideology and bureaucratic managerialism, **in that accounts of 'community' are defined locally along party lines, and in spite** of local interpretations, the bureaucratic-spatial construct of community is ever-present.

It is this latter definition that seems to dominate and in effect constrains practitioners' ability to influence the definition of **'community' in practice**. Other ideas of community governance do not seem to have had an effect on community voice in policy-making beyond the dominant framework of New Public Management, either in textual discourse or in practices where the focus on efficiency and outputs seems to drive who is involved. In contrast to this, contestations arising at the local level are along party ideology lines which therefore raise the possibility of competing ideologies affecting changes in meanings at the local level. This is an area of research that deserves further large-scale investigation in order to confirm its particular relevance to policy in this area. RDA offers a particularly useful tool for further research.

Beyond direct contestation, our practitioner event highlighted communication gaps between policy textual discourses and practices. Practitioners bought into policy discourses **'to play the game'** but still retained some agency to define their own community practices on the ground. This resonates with **Newman's (2001) understanding of new governance spaces being opened up** for practitioners through their increased involvement with policy-makers.

In addition to this, a Demos report (2007) suggests that government needs to consider how new forms of deliberation can support the development of visioning documents. Our report provides some insight into the contestation between policy and practice, and the way in which practitioners envisage possibilities for defining community beyond the managerial definition utilised by policy-makers.

References and external links

External Links/Appendices

To access the appendices referred to in the document, please use the following link:

<http://www.dmu.ac.uk/Documents/Business-and-Law-documents/ahrcappendices.doc>

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The Connected Communities

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