The Nature of Community

by Kenneth Pigg

Communities were historically “established” by people with a grand scheme to take advantage of “real or imagined” strategies, such as extracting natural resources, accessing frequently used transportation routes, or creating a central location for trade or politics. As these strategic advantages disappeared, so did some of these places, especially if lasting social relations had not been established.

Today, there are still places we call communities that have strong strategic advantages as a basis for their existence, but the global society has diminished many of these resources. It is only where there are also strong social relationships that communities continue to thrive. These relationships may be purely social, but more often also include the relationships built around business ventures or political activities. All of these bases for community existence can be found in rural places, although social relationships are often the most important.

Community, then, is more than a geographic location; it is a bond of socially constructed reciprocal relationships. Peter Block (2008) argues for an understanding of community as a “structure of belonging.” According to some observers, community is strongest when these social relationships are diverse, that is, when they may be based on any combination of factors, such as business dealings, human service arrangements, political activity, neighborhood proximity, civic associations or leisure activity. In other words, when we “know” people in our community and interact with them in the context of different roles, our social relationships are much stronger than in places where the interactions are based on more limited relations.

Community is Structured

Block’s notion of community as “structured” by relationships is important for any discussion about community. Close examination of the relationships that constitute an established community reveals a pattern of interpersonal relations governed by certain accepted norms or rules, such as reciprocity, shared values, inclusiveness or respect for property. In some cases, these norms are formally recognized and subscribed to in a public manner, creating institutions such as schools, churches, civic organizations and neighborhood associations. Newcomers to a community may have some difficulty recognizing these structures and their meaning at first. This is often the case when a long-time resident says, “You’re not from around here are you?” The new resident is lost “socially” since they do not know how “things are done around here.” Though norms are often informal

Community is a Collective

Although our democratic system establishes opportunities in our communities for individualism to thrive, community is also a collective, and many resources are treated as being “held in common.” For example, community parks and schools are generally considered “community property,” and all residents have open access to these properties. Similarly, youth are often considered a community asset — “they are our future” — even while it is recognized that each family takes responsibility for the behavior and development of the individual young person. The notion that “it takes a village to raise a child” recognizes this collective versus individual dynamic relationship.

Most commonly, the collective nature of our communities is represented by the organization of activities and interactions. Americans are famous for the extent and quality of their associational lives, even though all associations do not function alike.1 Some forms of association are little more than informal collections of individuals who interact with a specific focus (e.g., genealogy, bird watching, bingo, etc.). Other forms attract those with a more public or civic purpose in mind, such as community service or advocacy for educational quality; these forms of association may take on formal organizational structures and adopt charters for governance purposes. Similarly, some organizations, like soccer clubs, sororities or Girl Scouts, exist for more private or individual benefits. All of these organizations are based on shared interests and/or “sentiment.”4 Most or all of these associations simultaneously exist within the community.

There is the overarching collective we call community as well. The community “houses” all these other forms of collective activity and may provide a means of aligning common interests among them. This alignment does not usually happen without leadership that keeps attention focused on the values and goals common to all residents. This sort of civic leadership may come from a variety of sources but is usually essential to general community well-being and a viable future.

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Community is Diverse

The value Americans place on individual liberty produces a high degree of diversity in our communities. Such diversity can be expressed in many ways — the color of our skin, the values and beliefs we uphold, the activities we pursue, the behaviors we exhibit and those with whom we interact. To sociologists, community is defined by the nature of its members’ activities and their sentiments. In defining community as activities and sentiments, it naturally follows that communities will be diverse. After all, who wants to be just like the neighbors all the time?

Diversity can be an asset for communities. Diverse life experiences and individual talents provide a broad range of resources residents can use to get things done in their communities. The strategy of “asset-based community development” has been widely employed as an effective approach to improving community well-being. The approach most often used involves “mapping” each resident’s capabilities, no matter how distant from the immediate community need these may be. This allows teams of people with complementary skills and knowledge to assemble and complete tasks effectively. Obviously, leaders must also be open and willing to have a diverse group of people involved in collective efforts and interactions. However, leaders often are not willing to do so because they may be afraid that either their own weaknesses would appear to the rest of the community or that sharing power with others would cause them to lose power and control. Such fears are a sign of a limited understanding of the leader’s role and what leadership entails. Instead of focusing on old models of leadership that emphasize individual abilities, leaders should implement a more collaborative approach that provides opportunities for many to assume leadership roles and address community needs. Leadership emerges from interactions that promote collaboration and effective strategic planning.

Gaining an appreciation for diversity starts with an honest assessment of our own capabilities and characteristics that could benefit the collective. Using tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or True Colors Test provides an assessment of individual personalities. Other exercises that prompt personal reflection on diversity can help people get past their concerns and fears. An important aspect of community leadership development includes overcoming stereotypes and gaining an appreciation for the gifts that others can contribute to helping solve difficult problems.

Community is Networking

One result of our daily interactions with other people is a social structure we usually refer to as a “network.” On a daily basis, we interact with family members, friends, business or civic associates, service providers, and co-workers. These social networks provide emotional and physical support, as well as access to resources linked to others in our network. The popularity of technology-based social networking assets, such as Craig’s list, Facebook and Twitter, demonstrates just how important such networks are to individuals.

However, these networks can also be valuable to us collectively as we organize and mobilize assets to accomplish goals in our communities. As shown in Figure 1, networked organizational structures are very complex, involving different kinds of organizations. Though each organization is founded upon different purposes, they

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5 Ibid.
10 http://truecolorstest.com/
11 Crosby and Bryson, Ibid 61-63.
share a common belief, for example, of the importance of maintaining the community's well-being and serving the residents. Coordinating various community organizations devoted to the well-being and development of youth — scouting, athletic, recreational, cultural and educational organizations — could result in powerful changes or efforts. For example, a community leader concerned about teen substance abuse or bullying might ask each of these organizations to collaborate, develop a more formal working relationship and collectively bring their individual resources to bear on the problem in a coordinated and reinforcing manner. All participants then become involved in something we can call leadership, and such collaboration is very important for solving complex problems.12

Community is Resources

The types of networks discussed represent “social capital,” or relationships of trust and reciprocity.13 These networks are also indications of the civic structure or civic capital that exists in a community devoted to civic purposes.14 As part of the community’s civic structure, many organizations and individuals may also represent political capital or the ability to legitimately represent and influence broader segments of the community’s interests and processes.

Cornelia Flora and her colleagues have also argued for recognition of the broader set of “capitals” that make up communities, such as natural or environmental capital, human capital, built capital (physical infrastructure), and economic or fiscal capital (actual financial wealth).15 Community capital usually refers to the economic measure of wealth that provides the tax base upon which local communities rely to provide a stream of funds for capital projects and services. However, even economists acknowledge that “wealth” is made up of more than money; human, social, natural and cultural capital all contribute to community wealth as a means of accessing other forms of assets.16 Community leaders must learn to recognize each form of community capital and then effectively mobilize them to support collective action.

12 Bryson and Crosby, Ibid.
16 Flora and Flora, Ibid.