
"Community - arianism"

Chapter Six: Community lost? Networks, neighbours and the social fabric

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Communitarians often assume or assert that the spirit of community needs to be rebuilt. They see and regret that (post)modern people are fundamentally and perhaps irretrievably privatised. Etzioni (1994 p116 ff) explicitly affirms his debt to Tonnies for the paradigm of Gemeinschaft / Gesellschaft and shares his sense of loss which results from the transformation between traditional and modern forms of social life. This reading of history suggests a continuing process from the traditional/ folk / rural society through the modern / industrial urban form to the rapidly changing post industrial or postmodern, information based world of today. The crucial periods for loss of community would be seen as the rapid urbanisation of the nineteenth century and the communications explosion of the second half of the twentieth. Of course this reading of history can be critiqued as an ideological construct of capitalism entering a period of global crisis, as based on false nostalgia, as faulty in its periodisation, as ignoring the contribution of and oppression of women, and as re-imposing Tonnies's conservative values on concepts which he would have preferred to see as ahistorical ideal types of social organisation. However, most of the 20th Century sociological discussion of "community" has explicitly or implicitly taken this framework, which largely rests on the old Tonnies' duality as a starting point. Indeed it has proved a fruitful paradigm for empirical research. Whether the methods used have been participant observation, sample survey or social network analysis the recurring question is whether Community has been "Lost", "Saved" or "Liberated". (Craven & Wellman 1973; Wellman 1979, Willmott 1987, Bell & Newby 1971 & 1973).

The community lost hypothesis is the "commonsense" or rather received wisdom one, that there is no sense of community any longer, that in the old days everyone helped each other and left their front doors open without fear of crime. It is extremely difficult to evaluate from historical data whether such images amount to anything more than romantic nostalgia. Yet recent neighbourhood studies in urban areas so seem to indicate such perceptions are widespread among older residents. There is also some evidence that contemporary neighbourhood interaction and solidarity is limited, and researchers speak of "communities of limited liability" (Janowitz 1967). Sometimes in contrast the "community saved" hypothesis is brought to bear, when empirical work seeks to show that neighbourhood and kinship based helping and support networks remain strong in a particular locality (Gans 1962). More usually though ambiguous findings in urban research push the researchers to argue for the "community liberated" hypothesis, which on the one hand recognises that neighbourhood networks may not be very strong, while people generally are far from isolated, and maintain a wide range of supportive and enriching relationships. Mobility and telecommunications has allowed the growth and maintenance of geographically dispersed networks of friendship, kinship and practical support, which is based more on community of interest, shared ethnicity or religious belonging.

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Social network analysis

Many of the recent studies of the community question use the powerful analytical tool of social network analysis as a way of clarifying patterns of human relationship (Scott 1992, Craven & Wellman 1973). Using this technique analysis can move beyond the level of the individual and aggregated data. Using questionnaires and/or observational methods researchers can map the patterns of interaction and communication, their density, intensity, geography and significance across a whole social system. The notion of a web of relationships can be applied to individuals or larger social units, such as companies or voluntary organisations. For example work in progress in Newham is seeking to map the linkages between religious groups, and the referral patterns between voluntary sector caring agencies, in an attempt to evaluate the added value of networking in urban mission and community work. It can also take account of varying strengths of relationships, as well as different types of link, such as buying, giving, talking to, friendship or kinship.

The basic concept of social network analysis was picked up from the sociogram technique used by psychologists in small group studies mapping friendship choices. It was introduced to social anthropologists by Elizabeth Bott (1957). She studied families in London and suggested that the best explanation of degree of segregation between the lives of men and women in couples, was the "connectedness" of their networks of relationships. Broadly speaking if all one's friends, neighbours and kin knew and related with each other it was much likely that spouses would tend to lead separate lives and have clear role divisions in household tasks and roles. Couples with less connected networks were more likely to live shared social and domestic lives. Barnes in a study of a Norwegian fishing village (1954) was the first to make a connection between the concept of social network and the branch of mathematics called "graph theory", and renamed Bott's concept of "connectedness" as "density". A whole school of social anthropologists centred around Barnes and Mitchell at Manchester university developed the techniques in the process of researching urbanisation processes in various parts of Africa. (Mitchell ed. 1969). Sociolinguists such as Milroy in Belfast (1980) and Gal in Austria (1979) used network analysis techniques to predict linguistic variation and language choice in bilingual settings.

In sociology Network analysis was used in empirical studies of the "small world problem" (Travers and Milgram 1969). It transpired that most people had networks which enabled a communication to be passed to an unknown named individual on the other side of the USA in no more than half a dozen links in a chain of personal contacts. Granovetter (1973) showed how weak ties had a strength of their own, particularly in gathering information by word of mouth. For such tasks as job search it was better to have an extensive network of casual acquaintances than a dense close knit network of relatives and friends. Network analysis was also used to examine the interlocking directorships of major companies in particular industry. Access to markets and thence profitability was shown to depend on very much on who you know.. In other fields network analysis methods have proved a powerful technique for mapping the diffusion of innovations, or the spread of disease such as HIV/AIDs through a population (Klov Dahl 1985).

As computer power increased, and mathematical sociology became popular in North America, the techniques began to make research reports incomprehensible to all but the specialist. Computer programs such as Structure and Ucinet have been developed to handle large data matrices in which relationships between actors, or affiliations to organisations are entered as spreadsheets (Burt 1991, Borgatti, Everett & Freeman 1994). The programs can identify components, clusters and cliques in the networks, calculate densities of relationship within the whole or part of the data set, measure distances and describe paths between any pair of connected individuals, and indicate which individual actors are key nodes or powerful gatekeepers in the network. One program Krackplot can even turn the matrix data back into visual representations of the familiar sociogram type! Scott (1992) is a good general introduction to the method and its possibilities, while the collection edited by Freeman, Romney & White (1989) is impenetrable to the non-mathematician and best serves as a warning for anyone tempted to seduction by the techniques.

It is important to point out that the concept of network is used far more often in the literature than the actual method of mapping relational data. Most of the studies mentioned in the next section in fact rely on survey data collected at the individual level, and references to networks are often no more than a listing of contacts given as significant others (alters) by each respondent (ego). It is only where information about relationships between two or more alters is available that true network analysis procedures can begin.

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Network analysis in community studies

Frankenberg (1966) was probably the first scholar to integrate the notion of social network into the genre of community studies, and his attempt to construct a sociological theory of local community. But for a while the idea lay dormant except in the discipline of social anthropology. Then research work in Toronto by Wellman and associates brought local community studies back on to the agenda, using network analysis as a valuable tool (Wellman 1979, Wellman & Wortley 1990, Wellman & Wellman 1992). Wellman's work generally tends to support the community liberated hypothesis and shows that most people do have extensive social support networks even if they are scattered across the urban area. However, it is worth raising the question as to whether this is a function of the high level of motorised mobility typical of North America, and whether his optimism is shaped by a value system based on individual liberalism. The approach has been replicated in other North American settings. For example Oliver (1988) uses Wellman's approach as a basis for a very insightful study of the black community in Los Angeles, and Cohen and Shinar have carried out a similar study in Jerusalem (1985). In Britain there seems to be little current interest except in Bridge's study of gentrification processes in Sands End, West London (1993a, 1993b).

The theme of neighbours, neighbouring and local networks has been developed in the UK, mainly in the context of community care. The research programme headed by Philip Abrams in the late 1970s - early 1980's (Abrams/ Bulmer 1986). The focus in this work was the evaluation of neighbourhood care schemes and a study of the social basis of community care. Abrams helpfully distinguished concepts of neighbouring as the actual pattern of interaction in a neighbourhood, and neighbourliness as the positive and committed relationship between neighbours, a form of friendship. The research showed that only in a minority of atypical neighbourhoods were informal networks strong enough and "neighbourly enough" to form the basis of adequate reciprocal care. Even in such situations it was based more on kinship or friendship than on neighbouring. The social policy implication is that resources and organisation for neighbourhood care schemes need to be found from public funds, as one cannot rely on informal networks and altruism to meet all the needs. Other academics in the field have drawn similar conclusions (e.g. Clarke 1982). Peter Willmott has also worked on the theme of friendship, and neighbours as helping networks in the context of community care policy with a literature review (1986) and a survey in Edgware, North London (1987). The main thrust of his findings are similar to Abrams, but the main surprise is that while middle class people maintain active networks of geographically dispersed kin and local friends, stereotypical working class community networks were hard to find. Indeed a minority of working class people had neither relatives nearby nor local friends, and lacking such support were vulnerable to stress and breakdown.

However the notion of network is not fully developed by either Abrams or Willmott since there has been no attempt to gather or analyse truly relational data. Even Wenger's recent research and typology of the networks of older people is based on individual social work cases (1994, 1995). The network data is ego-centric, and even references to the role of mutual aid and self help groups do not involve the analysis of relational data.

Neighbourhood networks: a case study

One recent piece of research along these lines conducted by the author in East London tends started from the community lost hypothesis which is frequently expressed by local residents (Smith unpublished). Background knowledge about the area such as its ethnic diversity, gives further weight to the view that community is likely to be fragmented, if not altogether absent. (Smith 1994, Griffiths / LBN 1994). Other typical "inner city problems" such as unemployment, racial violence, high crime rates, homelessness and high rates of physical and mental illness are also found.

A questionnaire asking about support networks of kin, neighbours and friends was designed and a survey of 67 Newham residents was carried out in 1993 with the help of a group of medical students. The sample of respondents was recruited by a networking process starting from contacts suggested by voluntary sector and church workers in the area. The snowball sampling procedure itself showed that for many people the number and strength of their local network ties was extremely limited. Of 90 people contacted only 29 (32%) were able or willing to recommend names of relatives, friends or neighbours in the locality who could be approached for interview and who they thought were likely to be at home in the day-time during the week. A detailed examination by network analysis techniques of the interrelationships of 118 people recorded in this sampling procedure revealed only one small group of four old people who formed a clique of mutual referral, and three cases of reciprocal referral by pairs of female kin. This low level of connectedness is even more striking given the fact that the original sampling lists represented contacts belonging to a small number of membership organisations.

Responses to questions about community identity, belonging and participation produced some ambivalent answers. Nearly 70% liked living in the neighbourhood, but only 11% saw it as a strong friendly community. Only a third belonged to more than the one community group through which they had been contacted. Interestingly in an earlier larger and more representative local survey replies to these questions were very similar, and people were more likely to say they went to church (30%) than to pubs (28%) or sporting events (19%). However almost all the respondents with children reported their children had been involved in some local community activity. For adults, and especially older people the preference for a quiet privatised lifestyle is clear.

Personal networks did not appear to be very extensive, dense or strong. Respondents reported they were in touch with an average of 3.6 kin (outside their own household), 3.3 friends, and 2.9 neighbours. However, 18% of respondents could list no friends and 20% knew no neighbours well enough to list them. Indeed only one person in three said they knew their neighbours very well. Older respondents had considerably more kin and neighbours, but less friends than younger respondents. Only a third of the relatives mentioned were living in Newham, compared with 70% of the friends. Only 37% of the relatives were seen at least weekly. Friends were likely to be of the same gender, and age group as the respondent. Inter ethnic friendship was rare and almost unheard of among the older respondents.

Network connections between the significant others mentioned by respondents were rare with the exception of mutual contact between kin. 60% of respondents said all their listed kin were in touch with each other, compared with 44% who said all their listed neighbours knew each other, and 25% who said all their listed friends knew each other. Of course none of this information purports to measure strength or frequency of relationship. Although the vast majority of friends mentioned were living locally and seen at least weekly there appeared to be little interlinking between respondents friendship networks. In fact of 210 persons named as friends by the 67 respondents detailed examination of the identifying variables in the data suggests that they were at least 196 different individuals. The scarcity of duplicate mentions suggests a very low density of friendship networks connecting respondents in this urban neighbourhood.

The patterns of personal support and helping relationships experienced by the respondents differed little in quality from those reported by earlier research. (Abrams/Bulmer 1985, Willmott 1987). Only about one in ten of the respondents were receiving regular help from professional sources, although over a quarter of them had received nursing type care from friends or more usually relatives. Kinship obligations, especially for heavy and personal caring, remain strong, even if the people involved live far apart. In Newham as elsewhere they usually fall on female kin. Over half the respondents felt they could turn to relatives and/or friends for routine help or support of more than one type, compared with only 20% who could turn to neighbours. Even for the proverbial "borrowing a cup of sugar" less than one in five had recently been helped by a neighbour and only another one in five thought they could approach a neighbour.

Indeed neighbours seemed relatively insignificant to most people and only 10% of the ones mentioned ever came inside the respondent's home. This is not really much of a change since even in the "good old days" in the East End it was a rare privilege for a neighbour to cross the threshold (Young & Willmott 1957). Indeed one common expectation of neighbours in British culture is to keep a respectful distance while being friendly, and helpful in emergencies (Abrams/Bulmer 1986). In contrast friendship is a matter of choice and centres on mutual interests and general sociability, leading in the best friendships to emotional support and intimacy.

Most people expressed high levels of contentment / happiness satisfaction with their lives, despite living in a deprived urban area. The highest scores came from older long term residents, and from those who had lots of friends. On this albeit imperfect measure, integration into local friendship and neighbour networks seems to have some social and psychological benefits.

In the absence of longitudinal data, and with the prevalence of nostalgia in reports of life three or four decades earlier, it would be unsafe to suggest that this research supports conclusively the community lost hypothesis. Further more very different, and quite possibly stronger networks of social support might well be found in a similar survey of the Asian communities, many of whom live in neighbourhoods less than a mile away. However even these limited findings are an indication that neighbourhood community, at least for the people interviewed, is marked by its relative absence. There is no reason to suggest these findings are untypical of British urban neighbourhoods. Networks are far from dense and ties especially between neighbours are far from strong.

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Building neighbourhood community

If similar research findings can be produced from other contexts the pessimistic view of the communitarians will be endorsed and their case for strategies to rebuild community will be strengthened. If however the optimistic community liberated hypothesis can be widely substantiated then the empirical evidence for the communitarian project will be that much weaker.

The moral questions posed by communitarianism interact with the empirical work on personal networks at a number of points. Communitarian concerns with family responsibilities, and the importance of parenting are confronted with clear evidence of dispersal of extended families. Projects to improve parenting skills and support through proactive building of networks are already under way. (Cochran et al. 1989). But are communitarians going to call for the "gathering of the clans" demand that extended families stay or relocate in a single locality? This would fly in the face of economic and cultural forces and could reinforce sexist assumptions about women's caring role. Or are they going to advocate and build local community networks of support and care on the basis of mutual aid? While baby sitting networks might be viable, the research evidence seems to show that for intimate personal care, most

people are reluctant to allow anyone other than kin, or medical professionals to intervene in such a private sphere of life.

The communitarian concern with children and schooling is also significant here. Indeed children, with their limited mobility, and involvement with local peer groups in and out of school may be the best hope for those who want to see neighbourhoods as centres of solidarity and mutual help (Henderson ed 1995). Schools can often be a major focus for local community building. However increased parental choice in schooling, can detract from this as children commute further, and families where both or the only parent(s) are in paid employment, are unlikely to have much time or energy for involvement. Even more damaging is parental fear of allowing children out in the street unsupervised, which contrasts so grimly with their own experience as "baby-boomers". Growing motor traffic is a major factor, and the private car is also implicated in the lack of contact with neighbours, the anonymity and mobility of urban society and the culture of "stranger danger" which parents inculcate in their offspring (Hillman 1993). In consequence parents spend a high proportion of their life as taxi drivers, and even children come to be involved in friendships with selected others rather than in neighbouring relationships, with whoever happens to live on the block.

The question of neighbouring may be a crucial one for communitarianism. Normally individual neighbours are not chosen, even by residents who are rich enough to purchase a home in a specified type of community from which people unlike themselves can be excluded. One piece of empirical work from Edmonton Canada, in the Wellman tradition suggests that existing social networks play little or no part in dissuading people to move neighbourhoods. Quality of housing and environment were much more important. (Kennedy 1984). Communitarian values in contrast suggest, that one should take responsibilities for good neighbourliness very seriously. Yet, increasingly significant personal relationships are typified not by neighbouring, but by friendship and friendship usually comes about by choice. If attitudes derived from consumerism are becoming dominant in residential location choice and even in intimate networks of belonging and identity, the challenge of community building in privatised and fragmented postmodern societies is immense indeed. Generic neighbourhood community associations rarely engender great enthusiasm or high levels of participation, at least in the UK. Although they may do better in North America, in both cultures communities of identity and special interest are more likely to flourish, as we shall see in the next chapter.

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Key books for chapter 6

Scott J (1992) "Social Network Analysis", London, Sage

Abrams P / Bulmer M., (1986) "Neighbours, the work of Philip Abrams" Cambridge University Press

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