

Chapter I

The Roots of Communities and Social Capital

INTRODUCTION

Communities are important social systems accountable for sustainability and continuity of humanity. They provide a variety of support to their members, ranging from physical to emotional. Communities also enable individual to gain collective and meaningful personal influence on decisions affecting their lives. Decisions may be made regarding education, health care and economy. Communities naturally blossom when members work together to advance collective goals. There is no shortage of scientific literature on various ways in which communities emerge or developed and the purposes and roles they play in modern societies.

Fundamentally, communities evolve when people identify with each other; grow a shared sense of identity, shared culture, language, folklore and professional practices. Communities also develop when members identify with each other, build collective conscience and identify common goals—the village council, for example can work to fight crimes and social injustice. In other instances, communities evolve when members are interested in the same activities such as gardening, sports or music. There are also occasions, where natural or human disasters occur, people might come together to support each other and collectively repair any damage made to their lives.

Though communities are to all intents and purposes immutable social system, they are not just empty social boxes waiting for people to populate. They are abstract

social systems, where groups of people create shared identities, values, norms, and beliefs to systematically regulate their own behaviours. Equally, communities are not physical things that can be visibly grown, but rather entities that existed before their current members joined and likely will continue long after they are gone, as new members will have joined. Communities can pave ways for unprecedented synergies and strategic alliances as seen in many business and social organisations today. Communities created along this line serve a complex intertwined web of healthy and mutually supportive relationships among its members.

Since, communities are abstract social systems, the way they emerge, develop, change, and revitalises themselves, serving as focal interests to some individuals but remains mystery to many researchers. It is for this reason social capital is often used as an explanatory paradigm for the inner workings of communities. The theory of social capital attempts to provide us with appropriate lens to examine the complexities of communities, especially how people build relationships in them.

This chapter provides an overview of what constitutes a community. It provides some background context to the theory of social capital. More specifically, this chapter reviews social capital within place-based communities and the logic for extending it to virtual communities. The chapter also outlines the goals of this book, its intended audience, and the utility derive from a model of social capital.

EARLY WORK ON THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

The concept of community has been a major concern of Sociological research since the beginning of the discipline (Wellman, 1982; Ferlander, 2003). The concept started mainly as one way of expressing anxiety about the social effects of industrialisation (Nisbet, 1962) and was distinguished from other social systems such as society. Early work on the distinction of community from society can be found in the social scientific work by Ferdinand Tönnies in the 1920s. Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* became the baseline for later discussions regarding the semantics and pragmatics of community.

Tönnies discussion on the distinction between community and society in a context of reflecting on different forms of grouping, particularly those capable of distinguishing between pre-industrial society and society developed after the 18th century and most particularly from 19th century onwards. For Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft* refers to the closeness of holistic social relationships. *Gemeinschaft* exists by the subjective will of the members which affirms conditions of mutual dependence among them (Tönnies, 1925). Communities organised around ethnicity, language and culture or those communities with membership based on ascribed status are examples of *Gemeinschaft* communities.

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