

# Chapter 1

## Social Networks and Communities: From Traditional Society to the Virtual Sphere

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The concept of community has been used in social sciences to describe several types of relatively stable relations among individuals, in a variety of contexts, from small rural villages to metropolitan and multicultural cities and for different forms of interaction from economic exchanges to leisure and political expression. Emerging outcomes of communitarian relations such as cohesion and cooperation, exchange of resources and communication efficiency have fostered and stimulated theory advancements and investigation of these relational contexts. The following chapter focuses on the concept of community in social network studies and describes the main theoretical approaches and research strategies adopted by network analysts to study social groupings. The review surveys classical network studies and the theoretical debate that involved the concept of community during the last century, exploring the perspective of contemporary research on communities. The theoretical implications of the study of communitarian relations and social participation will be addressed describing main community detection strategies and the debate on social capital. The third section of the chapter depicts network studies that deal with the social impact of new forms of societal communication and special types of communities in the virtual world. In the conclusions, the text outlines the challenges that social research on virtual and natural communities is expected to face in the next decade. The complete list of references is provided at the end of the chapter.*

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## **DEFINING COMMUNITIES: NETWORKS AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS**

The use of the concept of community is at the origin of social network analysis, with the first empirical studies carried on by sociologists and anthropologists in European and non-European contexts. The original framework for community theory dates back to the theory of German sociologist F. Tönnies (1887), who interpreted the rise of the modern industrial civilization in old traditional European societies as the juxtaposition of *Gesellschaft* to *Gemeinschaft*, with public associations taking the place of community bonds.' *In classical sociology the concept of community*, as Piselli (2007) synthesizes, 'referred to significant social relations that involved the individual as a whole. These solidarity relations based on kinship and common residence, a shared mode of feeling, and a spontaneous willingness to cooperate.' (2007: 867).

The first network studies to adopt this idea of community were carried on by British social anthropologists (the so called Manchester Group) in the fifties and sixties of last century; researchers analyzed the social and political changes that were transforming African and Asian countries (Rhodesia/Zambia and Malawi, India) and related them to modification of relations among tribal members in terms of solidarity and kinship bonds induced by urbanization and new economic activities. However, the first formal systematization of network perspective was provided in the studies by researchers John Barnes (1954) and Elizabeth Bott (1955) on European traditional communities. Barnes's study of a small Norwegian fishery town highlighted the presence of personal links among the inhabitants that could not be summarized by localization (neighbourhood) or economic relations. According to Barnes, informal relations among members of the community, partially related to kinship or family, reproduce a class structure; a 'hidden' class structure that in an

egalitarian culture like the one of Norway would not have been visible on the bases of observations limited to economic or territorial relations. Subsequent studies of English working class families by Elizabeth Bott (1971) extended the concept of community reconstructing the personal relations of couples beyond the urban and social class boundaries, and relating their networks with family organization. The researches of Barnes and Bott put in evidence that people tended to connect and share immaterial and material resources (mutual help and support, friendship, pastimes) with others that were similar in terms of income and lifestyle preferences (a social propensity defined as homofily). These relatively stable sets of personal relations constituted a community; the same relations were also the bases for coordination in collective actions and decision-making, either in village, kin or family organization.

Since the first anthropological studies, network analysts developed specific techniques and original procedures to collect, analyze and describe significant relations among members of a community. In the study of Bott, for example, the principal indicators for community detection where size and density of contacts in personal networks and the percentage of restricted or large family members included in the individual circle, obtained by face to face interviews. According to this early theoretical perspective a community is identified by the presence of two main types of relations: social support (economic or information resources) and emotional or affective support. Other indicators, such as the presence of individuals' multiple relations (multiplexity), and the rate of differences among members of the same community (heterogeneity) in terms of social rank, education, ethnical provenience, linguistic group or residence, were introduced in subsequent researches (Thompson, 1973).

Following researches described thus communities through the contents of members' networks (types, frequency and intensity of personal relationships), and in terms of resources and

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