Chapter 69
Network Perspective on Structures Related to Communities

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ABSTRACT

The application of network perspectives to communities requires some appreciation of the variety of ways people are now writing about communities. Some scholars and practitioners have drifted toward the view that a community is composed very largely of the personal networks of the individuals who are members of the community. But the whole community is more than the sum of those related parts, and the structure of a community must include not only those direct interpersonal relations but also the relations among the clusters and groups and corporate entities that interact in and about this whole. If scientific knowledge about these matters is to accumulate, comparing findings among various studies is of vital importance. From the 1940s well into the 1960s, the local community was the recognized social unit that sociologists and anthropologists studied. Linton wrote of the necessity of the local group. Many sociologists and anthropologists gave their full attention to this local level of social integration through a field called "community studies." The work of Conrad Arensberg, Sol Kimball, Robert Redfield, Carl Taylor, Eric Wolf, and others had views of communities that had a network cast to them. The category "community" includes a wide range of social formations, generally local systems of fairly densely connected persons in households and organizations, systems on a scale somewhere between those domestic households and wider society.

INTRODUCTION

Asked to write a chapter on network analysis and community behavior modeling, I thought that would be simple enough. No problem! My anthropological work for fifty-some years focused largely on communities (e.g., Wolfe 1961), except for my forays into studying the networks of multinational companies in the African mineral industry (Wolfe 1963, 1977). As far as network perspective is concerned, I have always, since the 1960s anyway viewed everything as a network (e.g. Wolfe 1968, 1970). Every community has a network structure.

Ah, but it turned out to be more difficult than I had imagined. People who write about communities nowadays are using terms in a wide variety of ways. The "little communities" that anthropologist Robert Redfield (1960) wrote about fifty years ago have very little in common with the present-day "community of nations, the community of Jamaica Plain, the gay community, the IBM community, the Catholic Community, the Yale Community, the African American community, the 'virtual' community of cyberspace," all mentioned by Robert Putnam (2000). In the decade since Putnam, electronic connections have expanded logarithmically in both number and speed, and the community problem is even more vexing. Do urban villagers raise children differently than do rural villagers? What kind of village does it take to raise a child? Is this talk about a global village to be taken seriously? We anthropologists once got all our data simply by talking to people in their communities. Now, like economists and engineers, we also have to mine in data warehouses.

In 2003, a group of 33 "children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals" prepared a report with the title "Hardwired to Connect, The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities" (Commission on Children at Risk 2003). They introduced the concept "authoritative communities" in the hope that it would "help youth service professionals, policy makers, and the entire (U.S.) society do a better job of addressing the crisis... (they saw)... in the deteriorating mental and behavioral health of U.S. children" (5).

Some scholars and practitioners have drifted toward the view that a community is composed entirely or at least very largely of the personal networks of the individuals who are members of the community. That seems to me an inadequate view in that it suggests that a community so defined is nothing more than the sum of the personal networks that make it up. A whole community is more than the sum of those parts, but

also, the structure of a community must include not only those direct interpersonal relations but also the relations among the clusters and groups and corporate entities that interact in and about this whole.

I am not one to tell other scholars how they should think or what terms they should use. Still, if knowledge about these matters is to accumulate, as it should in science, we must be able to compare findings among various studies. Comparison requires some clarification about what communities might be, or, put differently, about what social formations might be appropriately labeled communities.

ON DEFINING COMMUNITIES

The editors of the Encyclopedia of Community, From the Village to the Virtual World (Christiansen and Levinson 2003) tell us that Robert Putnam's book, Bowling Alone (2000) was by far the work most cited by the hundreds of authors in their four-volume encyclopedia. Carrying the subtitle "The Collapse and Revival of American Community," Bowling Alone (2000) should be a good source in which a curious student might look to find a definition of community.

It turns out Putnam is quite cavalier about a definition, "Community means different things to different people. We speak of the community of nations, the community of Jamaica Plain, the gay community, the IBM community, the Catholic Community, the Yale Community, the African American community, the 'virtual' community of cyberspace, and so on. Each of us derives some sense of belonging from among the various communities to which we might in principle belong. For most of us, our deepest sense of belonging is to our most intimate social networks, especially family and friends. Beyond that perimeter lie work, church, neighborhood, civic life, and an assortment of other 'weak ties' that constitute our personal stock of social capital" (2000, 273).

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