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UNDERSTANDING 'COMMUNITY' IN "COMMUNITY VOICES":
IMPLICATIONS FOR SHARED ACTION

Understanding the factors that comprise communities and how they work is crucial for understanding our individual and collective lives since, "while we make communities, communities also make us" (Giuffre, 2013, p.79). Unfortunately, neither scholars nor the general public have developed a shared conception of what community means: "community is something almost everyone feels strongly about, but few can agree upon what it is" (Cocke, Newman & Salmons-Rue, 1993, p.13). While some thinkers (MacIntyre, 2007) have contrasted individualism and community in an effort to distinguish the latter more sharply, others have argued that contemporary community presupposes individualism (Delanty, 2003, p.190; Blackshaw, 2010, p.17). Drawing on Bauman and Foucault, Blackshaw (2010) has suggested that we are attracted to community to be entertained, instructed, enlightened and surprised: "community offers us new ideas about how to live, as well as inspiration, moral lessons, comfort and tales of the lives of others and how these might inform how we might live ourselves" (Blackshaw, 2010, p.17).

Bell and Newby (1971) analyzed more than 90 definitions of 'community' and found only one common element among them: people (p.15). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the majority of the conceptions they examined also included a geographic area, common ties and social interaction, but views diverged thereafter (Ibid, p.29). This essay considers some of the different ways that speakers in the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance Community Voices (CV) initiative[1] have conceptualized community during the past three years. In the relevant academic literature, as in the CV talks, diverse ways of conceptualizing how individuals live together overlap and each intersecting perspective captures a key attribute or facet of the phenomenon of community.

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[1] The Community Voices initiative has featured talks by leaders from the public, nonprofit and business sectors since January 2010. These individuals have shared their different perspectives and experiences concerning community building at the local, national and international scales.

I group the CV speakers' arguments I treat into shared themes and discuss their implications for community action. By community action I mean active citizen participation, which Blackshaw (2010) has identified as an amalgam of relationships of conflict, cooperation, confrontation and change (p.157). This article does not offer normative prescriptions or pretend to resolve the debate concerning how best to conceive of communities, but instead uses CV speakers' perspectives and experiences to comment on ongoing scholarly discussion of these concerns. For their part, Community Voices speakers have viewed community as alternately, place, belonging and practice. I describe each of these conceptions below and analyze them in light of the existing literature, being mindful of the overlaps among them.

Community as Place

Social scientists have lately viewed the "need for community" and the importance of place in people's lives as major concerns (Phillipson & Thompson, 2008, p.90). Borrowing from Soja, Gieryn (2000) has suggested defining place as not only the built environment, but also the ways in which those structures are, "interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined." (p.465) For Gieryn built environments are unavoidably contested and are shaped over time by those who inhabit them (Ibid). Giuffre (2013) has similarly argued that space should be conceived not only in geographical, but also in social (p.203). In this view, the distance between two people may be measured in terms of geographic proximity as well as social ties (Ibid, p.204). I explore this idea more fully in the next section.

When one conceives of community as geographical space, one assumes the primary significance of face-to-face relations that "foster feelings of security, commitment and belonging" (Blackshaw, 2010, p.96). A sense of place deeply informed Tal Stanley's, Beth Obenshain's and Anthony Flaccavento's talks in the CV series. In his talk, Stanley[2] argued that the ongoing interaction of nature, built environments, history and culture shapes places in complex ways. He acknowledged that these locations teach that our interdependency and justice

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[2] "*Of Photographs, Limestone and Place: Learning and Teaching a New American Citizenship*." Talk given by Tal Stanley on September 27, 2012 as part of the Community Voices initiative. Retrieved from http://www.ipg.vt.edu/CommunityVoices/stanley.html

are built and enacted "within lived relationships with the natural environment, with other individuals, with groups, but also in relationships with the history and culture of a place, as well as with the distant future of a place" (Stanley, n.d., p.21). He contended that responses to economic decline and social injustice should be rooted in place and he offered two examples of what he had in mind. In one illustration, the tiny community of Meadowview in Southwest Virginia came together to raise $850,000 in just 6 months to match a federal grant for the construction of a Health Clinic and Community Center for its population. As a second exemplar, Stanley cited a community in Caretta, West Virginia that formed "Big Creek people in action" to build a more vibrant economy and democracy for its citizens and to realize social justice. He argued that the struggles, successes and challenges in these communities helped to bind people within them together in a search for answers that are consonant with their localities' history and place.

In her CV talk, Beth Obenshain[3] reflected on how long-term resident families develop a deep commitment to the communities of which they are a part and to their shared history. Whether through land conservation or public park development or even accessing local government officials, Obenshain argued that initiatives that preserve and honor area heritage represent important ways to bind individuals to their communities. While such efforts are difficult, if not impossible, to sustain if undertaken individually, they are far more attainable when citizens join forces to pursue them.

Some scholars see communities as unable to resist the forces of economic globalization (Delanty, 2003, p.195; Smith, 2001) that are characterized by increasing commodification and marketization of goods and services. In contrast, Anthony Flaccavento[4] emphasized the importance of creating and sustaining resilient communities in Appalachia, in the face of globalization. He reflected on the relationships between global and local meanings of place that have redefined existing ties among community residents and created new social relations and have often benefitted the few while harming many. Flaccavento argued that as the amount of

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[3]"*Power to Build Community: Restoring the 'We' in commonwealth.*" Talk given by Beth Obenshain on April 21, 2011.

[4] *"Economies, Community and Love: Renewing the American Dream from the Ground Up".* Talk given by Anthony Flaccavento on February 24, 2011.

productive land has shrunk almost four times across the nations and Appalachian coal has become less competitive internationally, agricultural and coal-mining jobs in the U.S. Southeast have declined dramatically in the region. Accordingly, Flaccavento observed, individuals in those areas have become less productive, less wealthy and less content. He advocated for local, place-based initiatives to rebuild the wealth and resilience of negatively affected communities. One example of such an effort is tobacco farmers in southwest Virginia who have converted their acreage from raising that crop as demand for it has declined, to growing organic vegetables.

Community as Belonging/Identity

Contemporary societies offer numerous possibilities for belonging based on religion, nationality, ethnicity, lifestyle, etc. and this range of choices has created innovative kinds of communities (Delanty, 2003, p.187). The rapid growth of social media has created new spaces for the exchange of ideas and enabled the formation of these many new forms of individual and social interaction (Dozier et al., 2011, p.155). With social media, participants have an opportunity to contribute to larger discussions, but their responses need not be immediate. In any case, a group's conversation can be archived and that repository can thereafter be useful for revisiting opinions and assaying available information while also providing a valuable collective history of the views and insights of those who engaged in its creation (Ibid, p.156). However, some authors rightly caution that social media is not a substitute for, but rather a complement to, in-person interactions, since such interactions alone are unlikely to develop the level of trust needed for collective action (Op. Cit., pp.156-157). Moreover, as one CV speaker, Thenmozhi Soundararajan observed, although social media platforms are publicly used, they are privately owned entities, and when collective goals conflict with their owners' personal interests, their public use may be denied or restricted.[5]

Although some scholars dismiss the relevance of community as place due to the twin forces of social mobility and globalization (McLuhan and Webber as cited in Bell & Newby, 1971, p.18), it remains, as Charles Taylor has suggested, an important site for building and

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[5] *"Story: A Unit of Change"* Talk given by Thenmozhi Soundararajan on February 28, 2013, as part of the Community Voices initiative. Retrieved from
http://www.ipg.vt.edu/CommunityVoices/soundararajan.html

maintaining social networks, and thereby assisting in the promotion of social inclusion (as cited in Phillipson & Thompson, 2008, p.91). However, Giuffre (2013) has argued that communities react differently to outsiders, accepting some and refusing to assimilate others (p.1). With that fact in mind, Blackshaw (2010) has critically deconstructed a simply positive view of community arguing that, "the bright and the dark sides occupy parallel universes in any community milieu." (p.151) Amartya Sen has similarly previously argued that the illusion of a singular communal identity often leads to physical violence, giving an impression that it is hate that holds some groups together (as cited in Blackshaw, 2010, p.155).

Some scholars have argued that community is symbolically constructed through shared meanings, including the creation of boundaries, customs and rituals (Cohen as cited in Delanty, 2003, p.46). Avila Kilmurray's[6] CV talk outlining the challenges faced by a divided community dominated by decades of violence is a helpful illustration of this point. The turmoil that characterized Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to the late 1990s sharpened the identities and divisions between people and communities, turning them into simplified, if not simplistic, *us* versus *them* constructions. Kilmurray contended that continuously offering initiatives to challenge this sort of simplification is necessary to create space to introduce different and more nuanced views as well as to permit principals opportunities to imagine a more peaceful community.

The word *identity* has its origins in the notion of sameness or oneness,[7] and in community studies it is often related to the issue of belonging (Blackshaw, 2010, p.112). While individual identities are always in flux, human beings nonetheless persistently seek fixed conceptions of self that provide stability in understanding themselves and others (Ibid, pp.113-114). According to Kilmurray, that simplified sense-making around the question of personae significantly delayed the end of violent conflict in Northern Ireland, while also making it more difficult for the various parties even to imagine pathways to peace.

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[6] "*Peacebuilding & Partnerships: Reflections & Lessons*". Talk given by Avila Kilmurray on April 18, 2012 as part of the Community Voices initiative. Retrieved from http://www.ipg.vt.edu/CommunityVoices/kilmurray.html

[7] From Online Etymology Dictionary, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=identity

Conceiving community as a population's symbolic construction avoids reducing it to institutionalized social arrangements and helps the analyst view it as fluid, changing and open to change (Delanty, 2003, p.47). In this spirit, the organization Kilmurray leads, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, has sought to mobilize individuals and groups across conflicts and differences in that province by allowing for the introduction of different views and otherwise encouraging relationships across typical dividing lines.

Technology has provided new possibilities for common expression and mobilization, and has become enmeshed in everyday life (Delanty, 2003, p.169). Community Voices speaker Thenmozhi Soundararajan shared her experience using digital storytelling and participatory social media that allow community members to claim personal voice. Soundararajan observed that "silence is a doorway to violence," and she has dedicated her most recent project to making visible the violence against the Dalit caste in India that has gone unnoticed for a long time by providing members of that group the possibility of voice via digital stories. While she grew up in the U.S., the original identity of her parents as untouchables has caused her to adopt that legacy as her own. The 300 million Dalits in India have long been viewed as inferior and have been consistently persecuted in the existing social order. For Soundararajan, assisting this group in securing collective voice offers a powerful example of how participatory media may help to develop personal connections to address ongoing social discrimination. The filmmaker argued, however, that whether through a song, a digital story or a film, reaching across oppression and building bridges to understanding is not so much about technology as about the heart, or hearts, of a media-maker and his or her collaborator. Digital stories create space for new ways of thinking and talking about important and contentious issues, particularly when a community is divided along sharp lines, allowing those participating to find humanity in each other and focus on their social relationships.

Community as Practice

We are generally involved in a number of communities of practice — whether at work, school, home or as we pursue our civic and leisure interests, as Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have argued (as cited in Smith, 2003, 2009). Drawing on Wenger, Smith has argued that in communities of practice a group shares a concern or a passion for something they do and

collectively learn how to address their shared enterprise more effectively as they interact regularly regarding it. Unlike a community of interest or of geography, a community of practice is based on sustained common practice and mutual learning (Ibid). Such nearly continuous communication gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity, generating a group repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories (Op. Cit.; Hodson, 2011, p.278).

Throughout its 80-year history, the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, has served as a locus for communities of practice dedicated to social justice. Individuals from across the country come to the Highlander Center to participate in adult and youth leadership development programs and to pursue cultural work. At Highlander, they are able not only to share their challenges and experiences and learn from each other in their struggles for social justice, but also to create and sustain learning networks.

Members of the Community Voices team are an appropriate example of a community of practice. With a vision to bring people together to discuss issues that affect their communities, since its inception the CV team has experimented with different formats not only to initiate such conversations, but also to sustain them and make them relevant to individuals contemplating social change. Moreover, Community Voices members are also researchers with insights and approaches that can help the residents with whom they interact develop richer understandings of their experiences.

Implications for Community Action

Often regarded as part of community development, community action grapples with the complexities of individuals living together. In this final section, I reflect on the implications of the different conceptions of community discussed above for collective action. Such political processes assume an active and participative citizenry, respectful of local heritage and social ties, even, or perhaps especially, when seeking change.

Several CV speakers suggested that no community action is sustainable without understanding the history of a place, its natural environment, the dynamics of power relations among its people and within groups, and its connections to other social systems. Some scholars

today argue that communities most closely resemble networks that lack history and are sustained simply through the interactions of men and women (Blackshaw, 2010, p.15). In this view, networks are "the basic ingredient of all community action" (Onyx, Burridge & Baker, 2009, p.2). However, when community is conceived mainly in terms of social networks comprised of individuals, community groups, organizations and the relationships among them (Dozier et al., 2011, p.151; Hou & Rios, 2003), analysts capture only the basics of connection patterns, and much information concerning the reasons for those interactions is lost in the process (Newman, 2010, p.2).

Community action often has its origins in the leadership of charismatic individuals (Blackshaw, 2010, p.161). As Pam McMichael noted in her CV talk,[8] Miles Horton's and Highlander's philosophy trusted that people could come together to address their own problems. Horton believed that when people come together to talk about their concerns, there is almost always someone in the community who knows the answer to their challenge or knows where to get it. Accordingly, Horton founded the Highlander Folk School on the premise that those most affected by a problem could and should lead the effort to address it. Creating a space for people from different communities to come and learn from each other, Highlander has long fostered what social network theory calls strong and weak ties. As Giuffre (2013) explains, while strong ties are formed between individuals who know each other and maintain contact through the same peer group, weak ties are formed between persons from otherwise socially distant groups (pp.99-100). Strong ties provide social support, while weak ties offer fresh information from beyond an immediate neighborhood or locus of knowledge and action (Ibid, p.99). Community organizers who come to Highlander return to their communities with fresh ideas and new ways of bringing people together around shared goals.

Community organizing is a vital element of community action (Gittell & Vidal, 1998, p.51). Traditional organizing, which has often been confrontational, focuses on strengthening the ties within a group of people and organizations with similar values and interests (Ibid). While it may be effective in the short-run, such advocacy organizing may lead to social and political

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[8] *"Did Horton Hear a Who? An Exploration of the Small and Mighty Voices of the Highlander Center Making Change for 80 Years"* Talk given by Pam McMichael on November 29, 2012 as part of the Community Voices initiative. Retrieved from
http://www.ipg.vt.edu/CommunityVoices/mcmichael.html

divisions and reduce the ability of different groups to work together (Ibid, p.52). In contrast to conflict-related organizing, consensus organizing seeks to provide or ensure local leadership development, creating community-based organizations and facilitating respectful and mutually beneficial relationships between community groups and leadership (Ibid). Furthermore, the consensus organizing approach emphasizes the development of residents' capabilities and building bridges between such individuals and those with resources, power and influence (Ibid, p.53).

The Community Foundation of Northern Ireland (CFNI) has methodically and patiently employed a consensus-based approach to organizing. Building both bond and bridge forms of social capital among individuals and groups with divergent convictions, the organization has used formal and informal settings to create opportunities for dialogue and trust-building across a wide spectrum of local actors. Such new cross-cutting relationships were forged, for example, when the Women's Coalition of Northern Ireland was formed with the Foundation's support. The Coalition has since worked proactively to bring a wide range of individuals with varying political backgrounds into democratic politics, rather than seeking to exclude them. Moreover, the CFNI has brought together political ex-prisoners, victims and survivors of the "Troubles" to engage with one another to create a space for dialogue and understanding for moving forward. In so doing, it has sought to address the issue of divided communities and to promote self-conscious reflection among citizens of all beliefs concerning their values and norms.

Some scholars have pointed to the potential limitations of community action, suggesting that such efforts are mostly reactive and constrained by their local character, exerting little influence toward creation of a qualitatively different mode of social organization (Saunders as cited in Blackshaw, 2010, p.162). This criticism seems to rest on a conception of community as isolated and geographical, neglecting the social networks that help to spread change within a community and among localities. Pam McMichael and Bob Summers[9] shared several relevant examples of such contagion processes in their CV talks. In the 1950s, for example, one of the areas of Highlander's work that arose from listening to people from communities across the US

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[9] "*Project Blacksburg: The growing of an open source community.*" Talk given by Bob Summers on March 27, 2012 as part of the CV initiative. Retrieved from http://www.ipg.vt.edu/CommunityVoices/summers.html

was citizenship schools that focused on reducing the high rates of illiteracy that kept African Americans from voting, especially in the South. As McMichael argued in her talk, "The objective of citizenship schools was always to connect education to changing the conditions around people." After completing such training, individuals were able to register to vote and thereby to develop, "the collective power to push for structural improvements in their community." Highlander played a critical role in the American Civil Rights Movement by developing future leaders who were thereafter active in it. Moreover, the Center played an active part in international adult education efforts, offering support by hosting exchanges and education programs with community-based educators and researchers in Nicaragua and other countries.[10]

Summers shared a story in his talk concerning how he adapted and applied ideas regarding open collaboration and entrepreneurship generated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University and elsewhere to Blacksburg's context. He actively sought Virginia Tech students from different backgrounds to start a student entrepreneurship club and then helped build institutions and spaces for a network of investors, entrepreneurs and local collaborators to support the development of a risk-taking culture in the region. Summers also created TechPad, a location at which start-up companies share space and lessons learned, including mistakes as well as successes, across typical sectoral boundaries. Although contextually different, the two examples shared by McMichael and Summers together suggest that small-scale and local initiatives can have broader impacts on society and can result in legal, institutional and cultural changes. Arising from general concerns rooted in communities, such as civil rights or economic empowerment, initiatives developed elsewhere must be adapted to local conditions before residents can be galvanized to mobilize for change.

As individuals strive to achieve social change collectively, the ideas they hold about what community is shape the rationale and character underpinning their mobilization. No single idea of community as place, belonging or practice can sustain group action throughout a long period. Instead, as various CV speakers have suggested, the notion of community is more complex, and must incorporate overlapping dimensions of place, identity, symbols, learning and practice. As several different presenters have articulated, community is about what Tal Stanley called "the particularities of place"—identity, values, traditions and norms, as well as the social network ties

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[10] http://1000littlehammers.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/highlander_history_screen.pdf

that can result in collective practice and learning. The learning generated from mobilizing and organizing in one place can spread through network ties and partnerships to other communities, where it may be adapted as appropriate, to their local contexts.

Conclusions

While the question of how best to define community remains open, interested scholars nonetheless agree that such aggregations are significant in our lives. The complexity of community cannot be captured in conceptions of place, belonging or practice alone, but implies each of these at once and jointly. To develop an understanding of community sufficiently rich to incorporate this insight, researchers need to engage with communities not only as objects of inquiry, but also as partners. Such involvement will help not only to understand a population's needs better and to develop local capacity, but also to construct a more comprehensive view of what community entails.

The CV series speakers have contributed to the ongoing discussion concerning community action and development by emphasizing the relevance of their narratives and topics to people's lives. The stories shared by Avila Kilmurray, Tal Stanley, Beth Obenshain, Anthony Flaccavento and others have demonstrated the importance of addressing civic issues through grassroots citizen involvement in defining needs and shaping potential solutions. To sustain shared action in the long run, these speakers suggested, we need to consider the complexities that always surround and, as often bedevil, definitions of community.

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