Chapter 3
The Dimensions of a Community

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the point was emphasized that realism is passé in community-based planning. As a result, a community emerges from action and should not be identified with obtrusive, empirical traits. Although this claim is true, the process of conceptualizing and locating a community is complex. Human action is central but a host of issues is involved.

Conceptualizing a community, for example, includes the recognition of others, criteria for inclusion, a knowledge base, and boundaries. These elements are determined through participation, since a uniform reality is difficult to justify in the absence of realism (Campbell and Murray 2004). In the end, a community emerges through joint action that establishes a foundation for further decisions, or constructions. This base, however, does not necessarily represent an all-encompassing reality, with exact and objective parameters.

Through human intervention the appearance is created that a community is something substantial. In the absence of an obtrusive referent, a domain of inclusion is created and reinforced. Possibilities are narrowed and behavioral expectations outlined. Over time, simply put, certain values and commitments are accepted as normative, at least until additional interpretations are considered to be valid. In this sense, a particular rendition of *Communitas* is operative—that is, persons are bound together by commitments instead of external features (Esposito 2010, pp. 6–7). Most important is that any social reality, or construction, must be confirmed by the members of a community to have any legitimacy.

But a mode of realism has dominated how persons often think about communities. This particular rendition is commonly referred to as empiricism (Houston 2005). Like realists in general, empiricists contend that reliable knowledge is divorced from interpretation. Any influence of subjectivity is presumed to undermine the acquisition of accurate information. Communities, therefore, must have an identity that is compatible with the elimination of this source of uncertainty or their study and survival are considered to be suspect. The human presence is, thus, a liability in the search for knowledge or the development of a community.

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The Legacy of Empiricism

Empiricists wanted originally to make philosophy less speculative and, thus, a more reliable source of wisdom. Their central problem, accordingly, was how to pursue knowledge divorced from the effects of subjectivity (Hughes and Sharrock 1990, pp. 24–41). How could a knower acquire information and escape from the influence of interpretation? Any compromise on this issue would harm the status of philosophy. After all, philosophers have been viewed traditionally as having access to truths and moral insights unavailable to the general public.

In order to solve this problem, empiricists made two classic maneuvers. The first pertained to the image of the mind. As almost any student knows, the mind came to be known as a *tabula rasa*, or blank state. The mind, in other words, does not have an orientation or organize information in any way, but simply reflects the empirical character of the world. There is no bias, therefore, in the process of describing reality. The social world, for example, is simply recounted according to this portrayal of the mind.

This neutralization of the mind is only half of the formula introduced by empiricists. The other or second side of this issue is the status of knowledge. Consistent with the theme of neutrality, knowledge is conceived to be sense data. Knowledge, in other words, is equated with physical properties that can be recorded easily by the mind. Colors, for example, are the product of light waves that are translated into electronic pulsations that are conveyed to the brain. These sensations are physical and unrelated to culture or any other contextual limitations. The impressions that are deposited in the mind, accordingly, are thought to provide an uncontaminated account of the external world.

But how has this philosophy been a part of social planning, particularly with respect to identifying communities? In this regard, as noted earlier, social indicator analysis is very important. Communities are associated with certain physical properties—so-called empirical data—that are touted to be unobtrusive and objective (Kazi 2003). This information, therefore, represents an unbiased description of the social world that does not require interpretation to be understood. These sense data tell a story that is not distorted by personal or collective sentiments. Because social indicators are empirical "instruments," sometimes referred to as "non-subjective tools", they are assumed to be a reliable source of knowledge about a community (Astleithner et al. 2004).

Typically, communities have been associated with racial or ethnic traits, economic status, or geographic location (Mittelart and Mittelart 1998, pp. 21). The so-called Black community, for example, is not often subject to debate, since this color is thought to be obvious. Likewise, bridges and roads are physical elements that provide sound referents to circumscribe a community. Although a precinct map may be a political invention, all boundaries are treated regularly as natural.

A community, therefore, can be understood to follow certain physical boundaries, or extend to the limits of specific demographic traits. A particular neighborhood, accordingly, can be defined neatly and provided with a reliable, and easily

confirmable, identity. Indeed, these data reflect a reality that is empirical rather than speculative. Streets and other landmarks have a physical presence that any inquisitive person can verify! In this way, a community can be treated as a space or territory where some group resides or regularly patrols.

But sometimes culture, tradition, and interaction are included in definitions supported by empiricism (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Some critics might think that the inclusion of these considerations compromises the objectivity that is sought. In the end, however, these features are externalized and defined in empirical terms. Interaction, for example, is often equated with patterns of behavior, while tradition is something that a community inherits. As a result, these potentially subjective elements are divorced from human action and treated as substantial, non-constructed forces.

When subjectivity is introduced, communities are often thought to be "imagined" (Anderson 1991). With this maneuver, persons are presumed to participate in establishing their communities. After all, imagination is a human trait. The problem is that a community acquires a very abstract image. Along these lines, there is a tendency to homogenize these ethereal places. In this sense, imagination does not necessarily capture the actual creation and maintenance of a community by real persons.

At other times, social capital is thought to capture the character of a community (Sampson 2012). The problem is that these social networks—interaction patterns and connections—do not necessarily have much to say about commitment and association. In fact, James Coleman (1988) declares that social capital is embedded in already existing institutional relations and closed or stable social settings. In this sense, social capital does not necessarily encourage invention but adaptation. Additionally, patterns of interaction may be a sign of some sort of bond, but the experience of solidarity is not the same as empirical links.

Other attempts to be more sensitive to the human element have resulted in the desire to "map" communities (Kuyek 1990). In this case, persons are asked about their interaction patterns and the geographic context of their associations. These persons' experiences of community, however, are reduced to sociograms and environmental details. What is missing is how they define their relationships, conflicts in viewpoints, and modes of confluence. In other words, the interpersonal intricacies of establishing a community are missing.

As mentioned earlier, when communities are conceptualized in such physical terms, they can be easily studied. Specifying a sampling frame, for example, is a relatively straightforward operation, since all boundaries are clearly marked. Likewise, the impact of certain environmental or social factors can be clearly envisioned—objective lines of impact can be outlined. With both behavior and a community associated with empirical indices, the prevalence of crime in a particular location becomes relatively easy to visualize. Neighborhoods with specific empirical traits, accordingly, become linked readily to various problems. Due to their objective character, these empirical links appear to be obvious to any reasonable onlooker.

But as with empiricism in general, the human element is seriously distorted by social indicator analysis and the usual descriptive statistics (Scott 1989). Following from the desire to remove bias, and obtain a pristine picture of knowledge, subjectivity is redefined as the ability to trace or mimic these empirical factors. The problem is that sense data lack coherence and meaning. Without an active mind that intervenes in reality, in order to organize and contextualize this information, sense data have little to say. In fact, sense data are made to appear as if they have no connection to subjectivity, so that they are unbiased.

Associating a community with census tracts or population traits, for example, does not provide much insight into the history, desires, or values of this group. In this regard, simply pinpointing poverty levels ignores how persons define their prospects and will likely interpret a lack of resources; any response to this absence of resources, accordingly, remains speculative without more intimate information about a person or group. Reducing a community to empirical properties and statistical associations overlooks how persons intervene, or participate, in shaping their realities.

But focusing on the interpretive connections between people or events is thought by empiricists to encourage bias and, thus, error. Accordingly, planners who are guided by empiricism believe that clear descriptions are provided by social indicators, while the experiences of persons are clouded by emotion and other human foibles. The failure of empiricism, however, is that communities are treated very abstractly, as if these groups are merely places or composites of traits. The grand fault of empiricism is to ignore the activity of the mind or, in this context, the lives that persons forge as part of a collective existence.

Construction of a Community

What empiricists ignore, in general, is the element of participation that is central to community-based planning. Their desire to overcome bias culminates in them dismissing the importance of human action. They contend the ability to reflect reality precisely is all that is necessary to acquire reliable information. In fact, human intervention is an impediment to this end.

Nevertheless, many contemporary critics argue that the chances of jettisoning participation are nil. Instead, they contend that a fundamental connection exists between human action and reality (Dean and Fenby 1989). In terms currently used by philosophers, reality is thought to be mediated thoroughly by the human presence; without the organizational capacity of a knower, reality has no coherence or significance. As a result, the dream of empiricists to obtain an objective picture of knowledge can never be achieved. All knowledge, simply put, is tainted by perspective and the related contingencies, and the community is no exception.

As is discussed in Chap. 2, the dualism presupposed by empiricism is considered to be defunct. Through the exercise of language, persons intervene in the world and create a body of meanings (Winch 1990). A community, accordingly, is never

simply encountered but shaped by the definitions that persons enact to give meaning to their lives and all associations. A community, in other words, must emerge from and be preserved through human effort. Without the abstract foundations supported by dualism, there is no other option.

For this reason, contemporary scholars refer to communities as constructed, similar to every other facet of social existence (Wiesenfeld 1996). Through their participation, persons begin to modify their realities and recognize their attachment to other persons. To rely on social indicators or other empirical features to envision a community ignores the activity whereby they define their connections to others and establish the rules of interaction. Furthermore, the definitions that shape the boundaries and inclusion are deemed to be irrelevant.

What occurs, in effect, is that a range of possibilities is narrowed through human action, so that a communal association can emerge (Luhmann 1995). Implied by this participation is that social existence can be constructed in any number of ways. And due to this intervention, the parameters of a community, for example, do not have inherent limitations, but are conceptualized and reinforced by the members. A communal order can be preserved, however, only if certain interpretations or constructions of social life are loosely accepted, at least until further notice. In this sense, a community should never be considered a completed project.

During this interpretive process the identity, norms, and boundaries of a community are specified. As phenomenologists like to say, a specific "stock of knowledge" is created and accepted as containing important information about a range of issues, such as sickness, health, and likely cures (Berger and Luckmann 1967, pp. 39–42). On the other hand, unacceptable modes of understanding and behavior are identified and rejected. But from a constructionist's perspective, the separation between these realms is porous. At any time, and possibly without the proper notification, this distinction between these options can be altered. When such a shift occurs, the nature of a community is changed. Something that was normative can become outmoded and dismissed.

In view of community-based planning, these groups are assumed to have "paramount realities," rather than objective features. This idea is borrowed from phenomenology, particularly the work of Alfred Schutz (1962, pp. 229–234). The point is that communities can define themselves in various ways, and that the so-called dominant reality can change. And sometimes, competing interpretations may be present. Nonetheless, any paramount reality is a construction that serves to organize a community, only until another interpretation of this communal order gains legitimacy.

This paramount construction provides the general context for understanding behavior and events. In a manner of speaking, the resulting expectations may be considered to be objective, since the interpretations that support this outlook have come to dominate a community. Although these norms may not be accepted by everyone, the need for compliance is understood. At no time, however, should this reality be treated as autonomous in the manner intended by empiricists and other realists. A paramount reality simply provides some insight into how norms come to be accepted, and sometimes thought of as natural, even though they may easily

be contested and viewed suspiciously by many members of a community. But in the end, the accepted view of health or other behavior in a community depends on the "interests, priorities, and perceptions" of the persons who are considered to be members (Roy and Sharma 1986).

At this juncture, however, only the general character of a community has been addressed. Indeed, only the meaning of a community's reality has been exposed to human action and construction—that is, the "mundane rationality" that is operative in a community has been revealed (Pollner 1987). But another issue must be discussed when participation is elevated in importance and a paramount reality must be shared by persons. Without the imperatives derived from realism, how is the solidarity that unites a community created? How can persons coordinate themselves and begin to exhibit a sense of reciprocity?

Solidarity and Order

Realists rely on dualism when trying to explain the origin of social order. They begin, for example, by assuming that persons are similar to atoms and basically cut off from one another (Stark 1963). As a result, social order has to be imposed by an external force that is able to regulate these disparate individuals. Order is thus autonomous and instilled by a universal mechanism that binds persons together. A community, therefore, is often associated with abstract traits or themes, even myths about the past. The West Side and Little Italy are common designations that capture this abstract, almost ethereal sense of community.

But with dualism abandoned by community-based planners, a community is no longer an abstraction but must emerge through participation. In this sense, the first step is to abandon the outmoded idea that persons are similar to atoms. As a host of a contemporary social philosopher's note, on the contrary, persons always exist in the midst of others—an individual's existence is clearly personal and simultaneously collective (Dussel 2008). An atomistic starting point is surely dubious, given that persons are never severed from others, even when solitude is sought. Even in this example of escape, persons are fleeing from others who are always present, and, in many ways can never elude their script responsibilities.

The realist claims that persons are primarily atoms, who must be forced to acknowledge others, are defied by experience. Clearly individuals are open to others and share a common space or world. Nonetheless, their respective existences must be coordinated without the aid of a universal foundation (Bauman 1993). Indeed, the abstract image of an ominous collective existence loses credibility after the demise of dualism, since everything is situated and contingent. Rather than organized by universal norms, the collective or community arises through a process of mutual, or inter-subjective, construction and can assume many forms.

Through participation, persons construct their own realities, and at the same time establish a common identity or sense of community. In other words, because persons

share a world, and are available to others, intimate associations can be established. Through a process of give and take—referred to by some writers as a "conversation of gestures"—whereby persons learn how others construct their realities, bonds can be established that reflect this mutual understanding (Mead 1974, pp. 240). Persons can reach agreements that specify mutually relevant commitments and how interaction should proceed, until new arrangements are imagined and created.

A community should not be reduced to a place or a composite of objective indicators. What such a portrayal misses are the tacit and overt associations that constitute the solidarity at the root of a community (Hunter and Riger 1986). Through this activity an identity is formed that includes, for example, multiple histories, cultural practices, rules for inclusion, and parameters. To borrow from Robert Park (1952, p. 47), a community represents a "mosaic of little worlds." Therefore, from a community-based perspective a community is comprised of a set of commitments, that is, a collectively constructed reality, which differentiates some persons from others. Without a doubt, some persons are part of a particular community and others are not.

In contrast to the realist position, a community is not an overarching principle or image that subsumes its members (Levinas 1998). Although a common identity is real, and influences behavior, the solidarity that exists is formed through very concrete encounters. To even talk about a community identity, in fact, may easily begin to misrepresent how this order is constructed and reassessed on a daily basis. A community, in this sense, is a multivalent and fluid affair which, for the most part, is never thoroughly settled. As described by Melucci (1996, p. 71), a collective identity cannot be divorced from the interaction of members, including the conflict, and the accompanying generation of meaning that is constantly reworked.

Sometimes communities, despite of this fluidity, are identified with a "common" base of knowledge. Perhaps a consensus is reached about some affair or history? Nonetheless, common is not quite an accurate descriptive in this case. Given the ubiquity of participation, knowledge is never simply held in common. In a much more complex way, different perspectives must be understood and reconciled, so that a cohesive identity might be achieved (Taylor 1989). Perspectives must be exchanged among persons, correctly interpreted, prioritized, and treated as part of a common outlook, before a community can be envisioned to exist. Perhaps "information flow" captures better the process whereby a sense of community is established (Hunter and Riger 1986).

Although when perceived from afar, communities may appear to be seamless, the actual bonds are very different. Norms are constantly being contested and redefined, while expectations and demands are reexamined. Whether or not a project is thought to be feasible may depend on the reality that is currently in place. Likewise, who is accepted into a community may reflect a change in disposition and motives. At the end of the day, the reality of a community is elastic, but available to those who are committed to this particular collective identity. Young (2000, p. 221) tries to capture this sense uncertainty, and yet togetherness, with her phrase "differentiated solidarity." Her point is that inclusion does not necessarily

require that different viewpoints be erased. Quite the opposite is the case: These viewpoints interpenetrate one another, thereby creating a variegated image of a community.

So, the question becomes: What is a community? A community is not necessarily singular—consisting of clearly defined aspects, places, or operations—but includes various perspectives that are often questioned but recognized. A sort of mutual awareness is present, accordingly, that represents a confederation more than a consensus. A community, argues Martin Buber (1965, p. 106), is based on a "living mutual relation," whereby the interpenetration of experiences constitutes a social world. A community, in this sense, is a collective creation with plenty of variation, which reflects a commitment to a particular identity until other arrangements are constructed and confirmed. Gar Alperovitz's (2013, p. 145) phrase "pluralist commonwealth" is very suggestive in this context.

A community is enacted between persons, and exists in their hopes, history, interaction, and projected future (Lingis 1994). This identity is very real, but at the same time difficult to pinpoint. In reality, a community is a place of sorts. But this "place", for example, consists of memories, relationships, won and lost arguments, and ambitions and practices (Ríos et al. 2012). The actual space has little to do with this construction of a place.

In this sense, as phenomenologists claim, a community is "taken-for-granted" (Berger and Luckmann 1967, pp. 54–56). In everyday practice, in other words, a variety of perspectives are woven together and sustained long enough to constitute an identity. Although boundaries are constructed and porous, the members know who belongs and who does not. And at least until further notice, these parameters are assumed to be valid and knowable by everyone involved.

As a writer like Alphonso Lingis (1994) suggests, a community exists between persons that have nothing in common. But, of course, a community consists of certain ties. What Lingis means is that there are no foundationalist or universal properties that are at the root of a community. There is no biological connection, group mind, or invisible body that holds this group together. A community, instead, emerges from certain commitments and the inclusion of various perspectives that are given credence, at least for a period of time. Belonging is an experience and a sense of allegiance (Furman 1998). What is held in common is the openness to these often competing viewpoints and the associated construction of acceptable behaviors.

The Complexity of a Community

In many ways, as noted earlier, a community represents a domain of commitment. This claim was confirmed by a recent project undertaken in Ecuador. In official documents, this specific community was organized spatially as a grid, with a clearly demarcated center and periphery. In fact, on a city map this location has a very well

defined outline. But when working with this community, the elastic nature of this group began to appear (White 1997).

The first realization of this issue was that this community consisted of several neighborhoods and competing realities. Nonetheless, the general identity of these persons is that they are poor and marginal; they take pride, however, in their desire to work and improve their lives. In this sense, this *barrio* is bound together by a general history and some common experiences. Nonetheless, within this domain, separated by perhaps 200 yards, different values and realities emerged in terms of health problems and other issues. For example, one part of this community, close to the city's garbage dump, had different priorities with respect to health care. Additionally, perception of problems changed often following a small shift from one spatial location to another. Melvin Pollner (1975) claims that this change in outlooks represents what he calls "reality disjunctures," whereby coherence is maintained in the face of different viewpoints.

Although this community is 1 square mile in size, distance across this domain was not considered to be uniform. Some parts of this community, for example, were viewed to be more remote than others. Many persons, in fact, seldom visited these other areas and thought of them as foreign, even though these places are not spatially distant. The realities in these marginal domains were perceived to be mysterious in some ways, and possibly dangerous. Furthermore, the residents in these areas were not necessarily treated as members of the overall community and readily embraced. Similarly, persons from these estranged areas expressed that they did not feel that they were included in the community, although they wanted to be recognized as a component.

Membership in this community, accordingly, did not automatically follow spatial boundaries. Within the official parameters, degrees of marginality were witnessed. Some persons were also identified as members who resided outside of these geographic limits. In this regard, a commitment to the community seems to override proximity regularly as a measure of membership. Again, the desire to participate was a vital element (Chavis and Newbrough 1986).

When trying to rally support for this project—the construction of a community health center—these considerations had to be taken into account. During the process of establishing the community supervisory board, for example, issues surrounding membership constantly arose. In this case, family ties often qualified persons as members, even when these relatives resided elsewhere. Viewing the community in strictly spatial terms would have been a serious mistake. After all, some of the leaders in this community lived outside of the official geographic boundaries. On the other hand, some persons who needed services, and lived in this neighborhood, were often marginalized and disenfranchised.

In actual practice, this community resembled a life-world, whereby social order is constructed along the lines established by various beliefs and commitments (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). The recognition of boundaries, for example, depended more on values and perspective than location. Additionally, proximity had a lot to do with perceptions of distance and inclusion. What seems to be most

important is how persons defined boundaries, problems, and relationships. How a person responded to certain segments of this community determined the status of that person! A community, in this regard, is very porous and constantly redefined. Danger and membership were a matter of perception, more than objective characteristics of persons or the environment.

Trying to organize this community advisory board proved to be a challenge. Overcoming the negative perceptions and criticisms of some members of the marginal areas was not always easy, while interpretations of distance had a lot to do with whether persons were invited to participate in community sponsored events. But building this health center was a collective activity. Finding the community, however, was not a simple matter.

What planners must begin to appreciate, if their work is to be considered community-based, is that communities are not necessarily centered but baroque (Holahan and Wilcox 1977). Indeed, there may be several centers. New social imagery, in this regard, may go a long way to foster the development of community-based interventions. In many respects, from a community-based perspective, a community is "paradoxical"—a reality is present that is not necessarily imposing and very diverse. Togetherness is, thus, possible without the usual demands for uniformity and constraint, all leading to a neatly circumscribed group. This new rendition could be best characterized as a "community of difference" (Furman 1998).

The body, network, zones, and system, the standard social analogies used to describe the social world, are all centered—that is, they presuppose a central control mechanism. Their general message is that order cannot be maintained without a consensus or a more stringent mode of compliance. The ties that bind a community together, however, defy this uniformity; these associations tolerate a lot of variation and resistance. In actuality, a community is a confluence of different realities that is held together by commitments to others. Jean Gebser (1985, p. 544) once described this condition by declaring that the center can be found anywhere.

In this sense, a community should be thought of as "de-centered," or similar to a matrix (Kelly 1987). Other images that have been proposed include the quilt, salad bar, and montage. The point in each example is that various cultural or normative differences can be sutured together at their edges to form a coherent whole. Viewing social order in this manner will disabuse planners from trying to find "the community"; accordingly, while using Charles Taylor's (1988) phrase, they are encouraged to recognize the various "moral topologies" that constitute a community. Given the variegated reality that is often in place, any uniform or abstract designation is truly misplaced. Whether or not certain points of view are part of a community is a process that is (re)negotiated constantly and subject to new interpretations.

Entering a Community

Often the task of locating a community is described to involve identifying appropriate "leverage points or targets of entry" (Solomon 1980). This endeavor may entail contacting key persons, institutions, or political networks, for example, which are

thought to extend deeply into the community in question. In Latin America, for example, the Catholic Church is presumed to provide this entrée, while the churches in the Black community in the USA are thought to operate in a similar manner.

The problem with this account stems from the metaphors that are used. Again in contrast to realism, communities do not consist of a series of entry points, reminiscent of a network. A community is not a target! Such a description is simply too graphic and misrepresents how entry is actually gained to a community. Additionally, in many cases neither so-called key informants nor official institutions are integrated into their surrounding communities; these persons may have official connections but very loose ties to their target communities. In the community in Ecuador, for example, the Catholic Church had a weak presence and the main service provider, a large NGO, was viewed to be distant and ineffective by many community members.

Communities, therefore, should not be viewed as having doors that, if opened, lead automatically to important networks. Instead, the process of inclusion should be viewed as an ever expanding attempt at dialogue. As a result of recognizing multiple histories, plural realities, and contested norms and regions, appropriate overtures can be made to a community's members to participate in planning activities. As should be noted, a different metaphor is adopted: communication rather than contact (van Ruler 2004).

In the example of Ecuador, various methods were adopted to engage the community in dialogue. A survey was used several times that required the researchers go door to door as part of initiating a needs assessment. This activity was facilitated by training persons in the community—mostly women and youth—to conduct interviews. This strategy resulted in the community being understood fairly well, as discussions evolved that provided many valuable insights (Minkler and Wallerstein 2011). Additionally, the members of the community came to know the planners, thereby promoting the solidarity that was necessary to create and implement the health project.

Community-building, in this example, consisted of efforts to encourage widespread participation and the expression of ideas. Because they did not have an office, the planners were in the community regularly to meet with members of the community. The thrust of a community-based project, in this regard, is to fade into a community and, in many ways, become invisible. Additionally, the point was made constantly at meetings that building the health center is the responsibility of the community. Setting agendas, formulating plans, and assessing outcomes were thus directed by community members.

But as should be remembered, from a community-perspective communities are never built by planners. There is never an attempt to construct a community that is monolithic or even dispersed. The general principle is to allow community members to exhibit their talents and ambitions, and to forge themselves into a project. Although advice may be provided by planners, their input is never treated as sacrosanct but is subject to critique and accepted when relevant to the group.

Throughout this process in Ecuador, one theme was emphasized: solidarity. At practically every meeting, the idea was presented that a community project cannot survive without solidarity. Everyone who is part of a community-based project, in other words, supports and becomes engaged in the fate of the community

(Nelson et al. 2001). In the end, the capacities of this community were not necessarily built but enhanced. The opportunities were made available, in other words, for these people to reconfirm their connections and hone their skills.

As might be imagined, a lot of training was required for community members to assume these roles. Several women in the community, who were originally trained as health promoters, assumed the leading role in this process, along with a local social worker who was assigned to the area. In the end, these key persons proved to be valuable, but they were not the pillars of traditional institutions. They were simply everyday persons who took the necessary interest in this undertaking. Their involvement in the community, however, gave legitimacy to the project and helped to expand the dialogue (Fainstein 2000). Additionally, their knowledge bases served to guide the development of the project, so that this intervention would meet the needs of this community.

But consistent with a community-based methodology, this training was not simply didactic (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1994). The persons who were trained were actively involved in this process and, thereby, improved their skills through practice, while offering criticisms when necessary. These community members took the lead by providing insightful observations and a supportive learning environment. Often they criticized one another, in a constructive way, so that everyone would learn more and continue to advance.

Political officials, such as the mayor, were also important at every stage of building the health center. Likewise, some local doctors offered some important advice, with respect to obtaining medical supplies and fitting this project into the national health plan. Nonetheless, their involvement was always mediated by the community members. At all times, a "bottom-up" style of operation was maintained (Wallerstein 1992). At any meeting with these experts, the input from the community was the centerpiece. In fact, any attempt to circumvent this group would have been disastrous; any political gain, in this regard, would have been lost in the long run, unless the entire community advanced.

The operative principle at this juncture is "communicative competence" (Habermas 1970). Communication, accordingly, is not merely aimed to put planners in contact with community members, or promote some sense of cultural awareness, but rather foster mutual understanding. In more specific terms, the goal of communication should be to enable persons to enter the realities of others; communication, accordingly, helps planners to enter the life-world (or life-worlds) of a community. When conceived in this manner, communication becomes a dialogue, rather than simply a means to make a connection or convey information. Communication is the activity that supplies the solidarity that is required to unite persons and support a community.

Communicative competence, in this way, leads to cultural competence. Planners are thus able to navigate a locale and enter a community. After all, the mixture of experiences, definitions, expectations, discourses, and relationships that constitute a community is far more complicated but more inviting than entry points, networks, or communication channels. But by learning how to interpret reality adequately, cultural competence and, thus, entry to a community can be achieved.

What can be Studied or Learned?

Now the central question is: What can be learned about a community? Due to the emphasis placed on construction, and the changing associations at the base of social order, the image could be created easily that a community is chaotic. With norms always undergoing negotiation, and boundaries somewhat elusive, are communities substantial enough to be approached in a systematic manner?

These questions are important, since planners want their work to be founded on evidence and viewed to be helpful. The discovery of facts and rules is a goal of this activity. But despite the focus on participation and construction, communities have lasting realities. This paramount viewpoint, or mixture of outlooks, is not necessarily ephemeral simply because objective parameters are missing. Indeed, the norms in a community exhibit remarkable continuity, although they are regularly stretched and redefined to fit different circumstances.

As sedimented interpretations, the paramount realities are available for examination. These "recipes" for addressing various issues can be encountered, by anyone who gains entry to a community and is documented (Berger and Luckmann 1967, pp. 61–62). In effect, these rules for making sound decisions and interacting successfully, for example, represent narratives that unite persons. And while these stories are constructions, they constitute a substantial reality, influence behavior, and can be studied. Every community has these narratives about the past, probable success, and personal and collective well-being, even places that appear to be outside of the mainstream of society. In many ways, the term story seems to capture how life is lived.

If a planner is careful, these paramount rules can be treated as if they are objective, because they are generally known (Schutz 1962, pp. 229–234). Additionally, their impact is real for those who are members of a particular community, or try to enter this domain. These rules inspire or evoke specific behaviors, once certain constructions are enforced and reality and internalized. Violations of boundaries and membership criteria, for example, have consequences for everyone.

Community-based planners should never forget, however, that all realities have a biography. But contrary to realism, the use of this term does not signal that communities simply change and have a history. Of course, this description is accurate but much more is involved.

Basic to this idea of biography is that all constructions have continuity and exhibit degrees of stability (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Furthermore, this history is not predetermined. Past interpretations may influence the realities that are considered to be possible in the future, while future expectations may alter perceptions of the past. All persons and communities weave these stories about themselves, but such narratives are contingent and open-ended. The history contained in a biography, therefore, represents a gradual accumulation of information deemed to be real. This pool of information is not objective in the traditional or Cartesian sense, but still pervades and provides coherence to communities.

Conclusion

While the traditional belief in objectivity is passé in the context of community-based planning, the study and planning of communities are entirely possible. In fact, community-based planners believe that planning can be more effective than ever. Nonetheless, due to the influence of realism, the standard strategies and methodologies are thought to be outmoded. Simply trying to unearth empirical evidence is not considered to be very productive.

Establishing a community, accordingly, involves a process of self-identification. Nonetheless, this activity is not characterized correctly if a community is thought to emerge simply from allegiance or assimilation to certain external or empirical referents. Even though the identity of a community is the focus of both cases, the element of construction is missing. Self-identification, accordingly, should be understood to be shaped by interpretation, whereby persons carve up the social world and negotiate the boundaries of inclusion. Communities, in this sense, are "self-referential"; that is, they are created and reinforced by their members (Luhmann 1995).

Community projects, therefore, do not necessarily have a uniform trajectory. Like any biography, communities construct their respective narratives in various ways. Agendas and time frames, for example, may vary greatly. How long a project will take to complete will depend on how a community views the process of growth. In Ecuador, for example, the community's time table differed greatly from the original expectations of the planners. Learning to "grow together"—tuning in with a community's time line—is something that community based planners must master (Schutz 1962, p. 220).

Biographies, in this sense, make unexpected twists and turns and are indeterminate. Although there may be a general flow to a community-based project, as is discussed in Chap. 7, the nature and tempo of the various phases depends on the intricacies of the biography at hand. The usual logic of planning, therefore, makes sense but is contingent on how the narrative of a community is deployed. For example, the link between community entrée, typically the first stage of planning, and the identification of needs is mediated by a lot of reflection. How these stages are connected may vary. Clearly, planners and communities becoming attuned to one another, as Schutz (1964, pp. 158–178) states, is crucial to understanding correctly the direction, intensity, and rate of development of a project.

Community-based planners, accordingly, are not enamored of the usual promises linked to realism about value-free inquiry and the collection of objective data. What this new strategy must accomplish, instead, is engage the realities present in a community, so that a biographically informed description of this group is revealed (Finlay 2009). And in order to accomplish this aim, a lot more must be discussed than the standard issues related to becoming evidence-based and attuned to the empirical features of a community.

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