

## **The Return to Community<sup>1</sup>**

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I have always thought that it was curious that Division 27, a group that has adopted the name "Community Psychology" as its standard, has so few members who study community phenomena, or who use community concepts in their work. With some notable exceptions (Hunter & Riger, 1986; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Prestby & Wandersman, 1985; Taylor, 1986; Unger & Wandersman, 1985), discussions of community theories are hard to find, and the study of individuals has been the single largest content category of articles published in community psychology journals (Novaco & Monahan, 1980). While our rhetoric continues to emphasize the role of empowering values and social organizations and environments, studies of community processes are scarce. So now, almost a quarter of a century after the Swampscott conference, it is legitimate to ask: "Where is the community in community psychology?" My goal today is to help rekindle an interest in community as an exciting research topic, and to return the study of community to prominence in community psychology's research agenda.

I am sure we are all aware of the fact that community psychology developed in the 1960s as part of a paradigm shift away from an individually oriented psychology that was unresponsive to social needs. The concern of the early community psychologists was that psychotherapeutic models of helping were irrelevant to the needs of people who had little food, education, jobs, or decent housing (Albee, 1970; Mulvey, 1988; Reiff, 1966). Motivating themes in community psychology at the time, involved a desire for in-

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creased equity in American life, and a belief that psychology could be enlisted as an ally in achieving this goal. There was a recognition that the way psychological and social problems are conceptualized and defined represents a value stance, and that by casting psychological problems in individual terms, psychology was retarding the consideration of social paradigms and solutions. So the origins of community psychology can be described in terms of reformist values, and a conceptual reorientation to psychological theory and practice (Heller, Price, Reinhartz, Riger, & Wandersman, 1984) but not in terms of a primary concern for community life. There were no conceptual templates at the time that suggested how community life might be used to enhance psychological adjustment.

In describing the "rediscovery of community" by the community mental health movement of the 1960s, Hunter and Riger (1986) noted that mental health professionals adopted a community rhetoric not because there was any clear understanding of how communities could become involved in the prevention or treatment of disorder but in reaction to the failures of the medical-asylum model of mental illness. Community mental health in the 1960s was part of a more general social reform movement that sought control over the social institutions that impinged on the daily lives of citizens. "Community" in this context, meant oppressive social institutions. Community mental health professionals hoped to use the community proactively, but community as used by them "was a sufficiently nebulous concept that it could be used to legitimate everything done under its rubric" (Hunter & Riger, 1986, p. 57).

The belief in social equity and the need to reverse long-standing aversive social conditions was, and still is, a value stance among community psychologists that represents a moral and philosophical underpinning to much of what we do. But we are also influenced by professional traditions that have kept us bound to familiar paradigms. So, we must recognize that there are a number of barriers to the study of community concepts within psychology. For example, my guess is that the current interest in stress, coping, and social support is in part motivated by a desire to understand and mitigate aversive social conditions. Yet, it is dismaying to see the extent to which this research continues to focus on the psychology of the individual. Missing is a concern for the social structures and cultural regularities that determine the options available for individual action (Heller, Price, & Hogg, in press).

Let me give an example of how social structures shape interpersonal behavior by referring to my own ongoing research on social support among elderly women. All the women in our sample would describe themselves as religious churchgoers, yet there are differences among them in how frequently they attend functions at church, besides the religious services. In the most rural of the three communities from which we draw our respondents, church

members are involved in greater outreach activities. This includes visitation to sick and housebound members, and community projects to earn money for church activities (bake sales, quilting activities, etc.). In the most urban of our three areas, activities for senior citizens are more recreationally oriented (bingo nights, group trips, etc.). These differences probably represent different attitudes toward leisure time and the meaning of "helping." Urban areas have larger numbers of formal helpers, so opportunities for indigenous support are less available. Daily social contact in urban areas is more likely to involve exposure to strangers. On the other hand, those brought up in rural areas have learned that they must rely on one another in the absence of formal helping agencies, and their primary contacts are with others whom they have known for long periods. They also devalue games as more frivolous and view their projects as "God's work." Both groups report about the same levels of perceived support and loneliness on formal questionnaires, and so seem to be equally supported. They also report about the same amount of activity outside the home. However, research cooperation in our project was higher in the rural areas. Urban respondents were more suspicious and said they were busier. Rural respondents were more interested in the interviewers and in "friendly visiting," a modality of social interaction that was already congruent with their ongoing life-styles. Although we did not ask about their "sense of community," I suspect that they would differ on that dimension as well. My impression is that the diversity of social roles and opportunities for the elderly was higher in our urban area, but access to indigenous helping was greater in the rural area, especially for long-term residents.

## DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITY

There are at least two generally recognized ways that the term community is used: Community as a locality refers to the territorial or geographic notion of community—the neighborhood, town, or city. The second meaning of community, the relational community, refers to qualities of human interaction and social ties that draw people together (Gusfield, 1975; Hunter & Riger, 1986; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Here, the emphasis is on networks of individuals who interact within formal organizations and institutions, and as members of informal groups (our churchwomen, for example). What brings people together is not locality but common interests around which social relationships develop.

To these two attributes of community, I add a third: community as collective political power. I add this distinction because organizing for so-

cial action is one of the few ways left for ordinary citizens in complex technological democracies to develop social structures that are responsive to their needs. The power of organized constituencies is the leverage for social change, regardless of whether that leverage comes from localities or organized interest groups.

We can see them that the concept of community is a multifaceted term (McKeown, Rubinstein, & Kelly, 1987). We belong to multiple communities defined by the places in which we live and work, the institutions and organizations to which we belong, and by our shared activities with others. The village is a community, but so is the city, the neighborhood, membership in a religious, racial or political group, or membership in a professional organization, such as the community of community psychologists assembled in this room today. The refocus on community means taking seriously attachments to localities, relationship structures, and determinants of collective action as important topics of scholarly inquiry.

Sarason (1974) suggested that a goal for community psychology should be to help citizens achieve a psychological sense of community whose characteristics are "the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, (and) the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (p. 157). Sarason argued that most people yearn to be part of a larger network of relationships that would give expression to their needs for intimacy, diversity, usefulness, and belonging, but that they rarely feel needed in these ways. Also absent are social structures that would allow citizens to consider and take action that would remedy their sense of alienation. It is this lack of "sense of community" that moves the study of community to the heart of the dilemma of modern social life, namely, the concern that alienation is the fate of citizens in technological societies.

## COMMUNITY AS LOCALITY

Communities as localities were initially developed to take advantage of economic markets, or were set up as defensive enclaves. They were not developed with the psychological or social needs of citizens in mind. Locations chosen to facilitate commerce might be those that were close to sources of raw materials, such as mining towns, fishing villages, or farm communities, or those that were developed to facilitate transportation, such as river towns, port cities, or railroad and highway hubs. For example, consider the site of today's meetings, Atlanta, Georgia. It was a Creek Indian settlement in the beginning of the 19th century. Early white settlers built a fort and trading post, and by 1850, it was a town of 2,500, first called Terminus, then

Marthasville (F. Hunter, 1980). The population quadrupled in the next 10 years, and the city became a manufacturing, storage, and transportation center for the Confederate forces during the Civil War, only to have 90% of its buildings destroyed after a siege by Union forces in 1864. The city subsequently developed as a business and transportation center, which is what it remains today. Throughout its history, including its current status as a modern Southern City and international headquarters for the Coca Cola company, decisions in Atlanta were, and still are, made that primarily further business and commercial interests (F. Hunter, 1953, 1980). And so it is for most of the places in which we live and work. Very little social planning occurs, despite the predictable social problems that are bound to occur with the development of large concentrations of diverse peoples.

Localities eventually develop procedures for the provision of living space and shelter, the distribution of goods and services, and the maintenance of safety and order. Many of these decisions often are made on the basis of market conditions, but it did not take long for many people to realize that leaving basic decisions about community development to the vagaries of the market produced disastrous results (Bernard, 1973). Environmental pollution was the most noticeable by-product of unchecked industrial expansion, but so were more subtle quality of life issues. For example, the abandonment of public transportation (such as, the electric trolley lines in Los Angeles and other major cities) did not occur simply because Americans began a love affair with their automobiles. The trolley lines were bought by companies established by the giant oil and automobile corporations who then proceeded to dismantle a major source of competition.

Sociological studies of local communities went into a period of decline in the 1960s and 1970s, when it became clear that local communities have diminished power and influence in complex, technological societies. As Nisbet (1973) wrote:

It is very difficult to maintain the eminence of the small, local units when the loyalties and actions of individuals are consolidated increasingly in the great power units represented by the nation states in the modern world. (p. 85)

As communities become increasingly complex, it is harder for citizens to make correct decisions without technical information (Bernard, 1973; Wilbern, 1964). And, without both information and appropriate social structures for collective action, individual citizens are hard put to protect their own interests.

Nisbet believed that basic cultural values are inculcated and transmitted only through direct face-to-face relationships. A major problem for citizens in large cities is that living close to people with whom one has no significant emotional ties fosters a spirit of competition and mutual exploitation (Wirth, 1964). So many sociologists came to the pessimistic conclu-

sion that basic, meaningful social ties that are a prerequisite for group action are missing in modern societies. Hence, the prediction of alienation and powerlessness in urban life.

The expectation of large-scale anomie in major cities was not borne out by subsequent research (Feagin, 1974). While instances of urban decay and social disintegration could readily be found, primary group ties still flourished in large cities. The city dweller did not have fewer friends and acquaintances but did come into contact with a larger number of strangers. The city dweller also had access to a greater diversity of specialized resources (Craven & Wellman, 1974). The development of network theory in sociology and anthropology was one attempt to account for the retention of social ties despite large-scale migration and urbanization (Heller, 1979).

### RELATIONAL COMMUNITIES

A second definition of community is that it is characterized by the social cohesion that develops with close interpersonal ties. Hence the need to identify the structural and interpersonal factors that contribute to group cohesion. McMillan and Chavis (1986) have provided such a framework. They noted that a sense of community develops among group members who have a common history, share common experiences, develop emotional closeness, and whose group membership conveys a recognition of common identity and destiny. A relational community of this type is not bounded by location, since communication channels are available in modern life that allow individuals to transcend geographic barriers. Contact can be maintained by telephone, newspapers, television, and visiting across great distances unheard of a century ago.

Relational communities provide "mediating structures" for society (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977) in that they serve to connect individuals to the larger social order while providing a vehicle for the satisfaction of personal needs through group attachments. In more traditional societies, the extended family is likely to perform these functions. With the diminished influence of extended family networks in our society, we are likely to turn to voluntary organizations (Tomeh, 1974) or informal peer groupings instead. Mediating structures provide a diversity of opportunities for participation and are likely to engender greater loyalty and sense of community than are locality-based units.

Given the mobility that is characteristic of American society, significant social ties are not primarily made among individuals living within a fixed geographic locale. So the communities within which we live and work are usually not those that contain our most significant associations. Bernard

(1973) noted that "People no longer really live their lives in neighborhoods" (p. 183); and professionals (that's us) are the most transient and least connected of all. "If the housekeeping details of the area where they lived were properly taken care of and if security were adequate, they could scarcely care less about neighboring or social contacts with others in the area." Xerox, IBM, academia, or a professional association is "nearer and dearer to them" than is Westchester, Los Angeles, or Indianapolis (Bernard, 1973, p. 119). Those who are most connected to locality tend to be the very young or very old, women who do not work outside the home, and certain ethnic groups.

### **COMMUNITY AS COLLECTIVE POLITICAL POWER**

The non-locality-based nature of social ties produces a major problem in organizing political constituencies. The dilemma is that while many social ties are not locality-based, political influence and power are still distributed by geographic regions. Cities and towns may no longer control their own destinies as decision-making power moves toward national and international levels, but voting units are still determined by regions, and it is difficult to develop unified political constituencies when members of voting districts have so little in common. When political constituencies are fragmented or divided, special interest lobbying plays an inordinately powerful role. A political leader can escape accountability more easily when the "people's mandate" is not clear. Similarly, a persistent and vocal minority can be more influential than is justified by its numbers, and will appear to represent public sentiment when there are no other dominant voices in the political arena.

So one factor that makes it hard for individual votes to count is the fragmentation of the electorate and the difficulty of developing consensus among individuals with different views. Because they do not associate meaningfully with one another, they have little opportunity for significant mutual influence.

People become disillusioned in a democracy when they discover how little individual influence they have. As individual citizens, they might write letters to the newspaper, or if they are more conscientious they might appear at public hearings, only to find that their opportunity to speak is an acknowledged pro forma obligation, which unfortunately has little influence on actual decision making. Studies of political decision making generally indicate that there are three major sources of influence on the political process. First, the private sector, through its resources and market decisions, has an inordinate influence on national affairs (F. Hunter, 1980). Second, organized constituencies with large numbers of voters are given serious consideration. And third, decision makers give more credence to the opinions of those whom

they know and trust, such as friends and members of their staff. These observations are not particularly original (Gamson, 1968; F. Hunter, 1953), but they do point to the importance of social connections in the political process. Linking to others for mutual influence and consensus building is a key to developing an organized political constituency. Finding opportunities for informal personal contact with decision makers, while more difficult, adds credibility to one's point of view and increases the possibility of political influence (Davidson, 1979). I see a clear message here: Increasing opportunities for positive contact fosters a sense of community, and at the same time, increases political influence through collective political power.

Notice that I said collective power, not empowerment. There are important distinctions between the two. I recognize the value of empowerment as a professional metaphor, however I argue that community building and coalition formation are more realistic approaches to collective power. Empowerment is a useful concept in community psychology in that it suggests a value stance for the field. Psychologists are enjoined to work toward the empowerment of disenfranchised groups to help them gain control of their own lives (Rappaport, 1981, 1987). Empowerment literally means the process of giving power or authority to an individual or group. However, used as an action metaphor, the term can be misleading. It suggests that power can be *given* to some group, when in actuality, meaningful power must be *taken*. For example, black political leaders achieved political power by organizing their own constituencies as a base of power. They then reached out to other groups with similar political agendas. They were not given power by anyone; if anything, others continually placed obstacles in their path. Without a base of power, the encouragement of sympathetic whites was not enough.

The way the term is sometimes used in psychology also can imply that the exercise of empowerment can be an individualistic act that can be taken by psychologists in solo practice, independent of the action of others. In fact, psychologists have very little political power. We have information and skills that others can use to some advantage in their quest to gain power, but their power depends upon the strength of their constituency, and the coalitions that they, and we, form together. Ultimately, power is in the community of like-minded individuals who come together to form political coalitions. Working towards collective power means helping to reduce the structural and interpersonal barriers that prevent community from developing, barriers between ourselves and others, and among groups that have more in common than they may realize.

Atlanta presents an interesting historical example of the exercise of collective power and subsequent coalition formation. In 1973, the local NAACP was able to force a settlement of a school integration lawsuit that had been left unresolved in the courts for over a decade (Trillin, 1973). The black com-



munity in Atlanta was becoming politically organized and was attracting sympathetic whites to their coalition. White business leaders, who dominated local politics till then, recognized the existence of a new political force that would have to be accommodated. They negotiated a settlement behind closed doors with the NAACP leadership in order to prevent the problems that protracted conflict would cause the business climate of the city. While the settlement had strong local support in the black community, it drew considerable national criticism because blacks gave up the demand for forced integration in return for greater administrative control of the schools (including the right to name a black school superintendent) which, in turn, meant a greater likelihood of quality education for black children. By 1973, the Atlanta schools were 80% black, with many whites fleeing to the suburbs. Some liberal political groups at the national level were advocating merging the Atlanta schools with those in the surrounding suburbs to produce forced integration. The majority of black parents in Atlanta were opposed to forced busing of their children, and knew that their white counterparts were equally opposed. They also recognized that the consolidation plan would dilute their now growing political power.

There are several reasons why citizens often have difficulty coming together for unified action. Thus far, we have mentioned the structural barriers associated with urbanization, for example, the fact that it is difficult to develop close ties with individuals whom we meet only briefly in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of contact. We must also recognize that community life is not conflict-free. Contact with heterogenous groups increases the strain of daily living. Differences among people are bound to produce competing agendas, and attempting to organize diverse elements in a community may simply sharpen existing divisions among conflicting constituencies.

Members of organizations usually come together with different levels of resources. Members are not equal in their roles and responsibilities, or in the information, motivation, and resources they possess. Since members are stakeholders with different levels of commitment to the organization's existence, it is difficult for power to be given up to those seen as less committed or knowledgeable (Gruber & Trickett, 1987). In a fascinating case study of the governing council of an alternative school, Gruber and Trickett documented the difficulty teachers faced in ceding authority to student and parent members of the council, despite the school's egalitarian ethic and commitment to empowerment. Gruber and Trickett concluded that "the very institutional structure that puts one group in a position to empower others also works to undermine the act of empowerment" (p. 370). I am reminded of the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" which holds that it is functionally necessary for power to eventually come into the hands of a small group of people, regardless of the form of government involved:

This means that, even if the ideology of an organization is to disperse power widely, power will flow into the hands of a small group. Members of the group will seek to maintain their power by directing their energies to sustaining their organization and their role within it, even if such action means that the organization will be less successful in achieving its ideological goals. (Heller et al., 1984, p. 310)

So in talking about community power it is important not to raise unrealistic expectations by implying that equality in power can be achieved, when in reality, there are boundaries to the amount of power favored groups are likely to give up to others.

An added dilemma emerged from findings of community development projects associated with the 1960s War on Poverty. When some community groups finally gained power to control their own affairs, they often provided the same types of services to their constituencies as more traditional agencies provided previously. "Decision-making power, often hard-fought and hard-won by resident groups, seems to have made little difference in actual programs" (Warren, 1973, p. 335). Revolutions may change the cast of characters of those in power, but also needed are changes in relationships, social structures, and modes of operation characteristic of a given organization or society. Studies of how reformist organizations retain or lose their reform spirit show the operation of a number of interrelated factors (Riger, 1984). Some of these are the size of the organization, its decision-making style, and relationships between members and leaders. Other factors are the organization's resources and traditions, and how it negotiates its relationship to the surrounding community (Heller et al., 1984). Research on neighborhood block organizations that maintain themselves versus those that lapse into inactivity show the operation of similar factors. Block organizations that remain strong are those that establish ties to external resources, offer a wide range of participation opportunities, have a more differentiated organizational structure, with a greater number of officers and committees to perform specialized functions, have clearly established rules and procedures, and use a greater number of communication channels to contact and recruit members (Wandersman & Florin, in press).

## STEPS IN COMMUNITY BUILDING

What these issues mean to me is that community building must be started with modest expectations. Although we know about some of the conditions that facilitate collective action (Smelser, 1963; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977), we know much less about how to optimize the functioning of community groups. For example, community groups do not always act wisely, nor are they necessarily willing to remedy unmet needs once these have been

uncovered. Participation rates in community groups usually are low (Mindick, 1986; Rich, 1986) and negative effects sometimes occur such as intolerance and scapegoating of deviants. It must be remembered that community building by itself does not solve problems associated with inequity, but it does provide social structures by which such problems can be addressed.

Community building begins when citizens with common interests or complaints come together. Communities of like-minded individuals more easily organize themselves than do locality-based communities. A common history and identity are important bases for initial group formation. Shared activities and common experiences of the group then become a basis for generating emotional closeness that further cements group identification.

Once a sense of community has developed, two additional steps are needed for that group to develop collective power: coalition formation and regionalization. Coalition formation requires a common vision among members of different groups, agreement concerning goals, trust, and a willingness to cooperate. Equality of effort, commitment, or power are not required, only a willingness to work together with some sharing of talent and resources, and structures that promote participation and collaboration (Bond & Keys, 1988). Community psychologists can help in the process of group formation and coalition building because they have skills in bringing people together and developing group activities that highlight trust and member similarity. Psychologists also can help develop organizational structures that allow groups to maintain themselves over time. Gruber and Trickett (1987) pointed to the difficulties that groups have in maintaining their mission when organizational structures are purposely avoided. When individual citizens lose interest and drift away, structure provides organizational roles that other group members can adopt. Ultimately however, success in community building depends more upon group effort and will than upon psychological expertise.

There are several reasons why regionalization of community building is important. Citizens in both cities and suburbs are finding that leverage to address their concerns primarily comes from coalitions of groups with similar interests. Thus, we are now seeing federated national associations built from local neighborhoods and groups (A. Hunter, 1979; Street & Davidson, 1978). Equally important, however, is that local and regional groups are more likely to generate citizen commitment. People have difficulty in identifying with efforts that are exclusively mounted from above without their personal involvement. For example, national media campaigns usually have only limited success if personal contacts are absent that would normally allow recognition of individual achievement. Personal contact also is important to facilitate interpersonal bonding and to develop group cohesion and commitment. One of the major lessons of the 1960s is that social reform imposed

at the national level does not take root and flourish unless local constituencies for the national effort are nurtured simultaneously (Heller, Jenkins, Steffen, & Swindle, in press).

## COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

So what has all this to do with psychology? Have I been talking only about sociology and political science, or possibly about some new conceptual paradigms that are needed in psychology? The very fact that these questions can legitimately be entertained demonstrates the narrowness of our scholarly and professional focus and the conceptual barriers created by our professional traditions (Heller et al., in press; Sarason, 1974). We tend to study individuals, not collective groups, and our bias is to focus on behaviors with clear health-related outcomes. Our professional traditions tell us to attend to symptoms of depressed affect, such as the number of days when it was hard to get up in the morning, and to ignore signs of political apathy, such as the number of years of not registering to vote. We ask about queasy stomachs, sleepless nights, and family conflicts, but not about feeling safe in the streets, the number of persons on our block that we know by first name, or the availability of recreational centers for teens. We ask our teenagers about their experiences with drugs, alcohol, and sex, but do not ask them about their hopes for the future, the community attributes they value, or whether they believe that they can make a personal impact upon the way they, or others, will live 10 years from now. We ask young couples about how many children they would like to have, but not about the future they envision for themselves in their retirement; or about the changes they would like to see in community structures that would expand the choices for them, when they become elderly, beyond those currently available—living alone, living with family, or institutionalization. My point is fairly straightforward: Not asking about community structures reflects our theoretical biases which, in turn, defines the domain of relevant inquiry. It also is an acknowledgment of *professional* anomie. The study of community structures will become part of our professional agenda only when we expand the conceptual templates through which we view the world, and we come to believe that community structures are modifiable and worth our collective effort. An axiom of community development is that regardless of the severity of their problems, people will not act unless they expect some benefit to result from their effort. The same can be said for professional action. Professionals will not engage in community research or action unless they expect some positive benefit from their effort. The rewards can come from professional recog-

tion or community accomplishment, but in the last analysis, the study of community must be seen as a positive enterprise.

The conception of community to which I am advocating we return is not a simple longing for *gemeinschaft* but a recognition that group attachments are at the core of the development of self-identity and self-efficacy. The study of community and group processes have an important place in psychological scholarship because these processes impact upon personal and social development. The conceptions of community that we develop must recognize its multifaceted nature and go beyond locality-based models of village and neighborhood to include the diversity of groups with which most of us identify and which give meaning to our lives.

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