

Discourse

Personal Communities as Sources of Social Support

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There are at least two ways of looking at community: (a) as a traditional spatially bounded community rooted in neighbourhoods, and (b) as the new type of community we discuss here: *personal communities* defined as connected to the individuals at their centres. From this standpoint, friends, neighbours, kin, acquaintances, co-workers, and fellow members of organizations are personal community members, connected to the individual at the centre and often connected to each other. Personal communities are the subset of those members of personal networks whom people care about and with whom they are in frequent contact and exchange resources.

While personal communities have always been with us, they have become more palpable and visible since the advent of the Internet. E-mail lists of friends and social networking Web sites such as Facebook and MySpace (which we collectively call MyFace) organize people's social worlds in terms of lists of their friends and acquaintances — large chunks of their personal communities.

Whereas some scholars continue to study community in terms of spatially bounded units such as groups, neighbourhoods, and villages, the current state of the art focuses on community as an interpenetrating combination of online and offline worlds managed by autonomous individuals at their respective centres (Boase & Wellman, 2006). To be sure, personal communities have always existed, but their form has changed drastically with time. In an earlier period, personal communities were mostly geographically bound, densely knit, and broad-based — organized around discrete social units such as bars and taverns, steel towns, and neighbourhoods. Today, many personal communities are unmistakably far-flung, loosely knit, and specialized. The growth of social affordances such as mobile phones and e-mail has facilitated this transformation. Where landline phones link “households to households,” mobile phones and e-mail sustain communication directly between “person and person,” giving rise to a contemporary form of community called “networked individualism” (Wellman, 1979, 2001).

A pressing concern with respect to contemporary communities is their alleged decline over the past hundred years. In the mid-1990s the political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) argued that Americans were “bowling alone” and that civic activities such as voting, social club membership, and family dinners were on the decline. Recently McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006) repeated the caution, showing that the discussion networks of Americans decreased from three to about two members in the space of two decades, from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s. A second and related concern has been the possible decline of community in the so-called Internet Age. Some commentators have expressed the belief that the Internet will beset individuals with online addictions and deprive them of face-to-face communication as they focus their attention on online interactions (Boase & Wellman, 2006).

Yet most personal network studies show that community has rarely disappeared from societies but is embedded in personal networks. A number of studies conducted in Asia, Europe, and North and South America have demonstrated that communities persist in the form of personal networks and flourish as a central part of people’s lives (Chua, Madej, & Wellman, forthcoming; Wellman, 2007). Although formal leisure organizations (such as the Lions Club) have declined in membership, they have been supplanted by more informal means of communicating and socializing. Large networks of specialized ties are compensating for the shrinkage of very strong ties. Moreover, with social affordances such as the Internet and e-mail, distance has become less of a hindrance as communication has increasingly become defined by social rather than spatial accessibility (Hogan, 2008). Also, while contemporary communities may have gone indoors, to cafés and living rooms and computer screens, community has not disappeared (Fischer, 2005; Wellman, 1999). From indoors, people continue to be social: They chat with friends online, meet them offline to round out discussions, and meet online again to talk about other things.

The Internet has not destroyed or even weakened community, but, rather, has enhanced it. Online and offline interactions are becoming seamlessly integrated (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006). In everyday life, people use the Internet to achieve what they have always been achieving — social interaction. The Internet is a technological marvel, to be sure, but the technology is marvellous precisely because it allows people to be especially social.

Communities as Personal Networks

One way to understand the personal network approach is to think about a person’s Friends on the Facebook social networking Web site. The sub-

scriber of the account is “ego.” His/her personal community comprises all the other Facebook users personally linked to him/her as Friends. A Friend can be anyone — from an acquaintance living miles away, to a neighbour living next door, to a sibling living in the same house. With Internet-based social affordances such as Facebook, modern-day personal communities typically comprise a combination of local and global ties, reflecting the social trend towards “glocalization” (Hampton & Wellman, 2003).

Recently, concerns have been raised about the lack of privacy on MyFace, but such is the world we live in today: Communities have become personal and private and yet in some ways significantly public, with Friends being shared and recommended across networks. For example, it has become quite common for Friends to peruse one another’s personal networks in their free time. This is done by simply clicking on the name of a particular network member and pointing the cursor to that person’s network. One hypothesis is that MyFace facilitates transitive relations — that is, if Bob knows both Ted and Alice, then over time Ted and Alice are likely to get to know each other. In short, personal communities are personal, but they are also shared across personal networks. As this sharing is multiplied, different parts of the social structure overlap and intersect. Such intertwining may break down barriers between groups and unite individuals through the sharing of new information and friendship. MyFace creates opportunities for the development of diverse personal communities: To have diverse friends is to have diverse experiences, and all these experiences add up to a culturally enriched life.

Personal Community and Social Support

A personal community typically comprises a network of arrangements differentiated roughly by an inner and an outer core. The inner core tends to comprise networks that are densely knit and multiplex, while the outer core tends to comprise networks that are sparse and segmented (Hogan, 2008; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). As modern societies have become differentiated, the functions of personal communities have likewise become specialized and diverse.

Reflecting modern trends in marketing, individuals now shop for support at specialized interpersonal boutiques rather than at general stores. Diverse ties fulfil diverse functions. Strong ties in the form of immediate kin are typically associated with long-term care and small services. Friends, siblings, and organizational members, especially those with strong ties, are likely to be social companions. Physically accessible relations are more likely to provide large and small services and women are more likely to provide emotional aid. As personal managers of their

personal communities, individuals come to learn about what kinds of networks work for what purposes, and thereby “invest” in unique and diverse combinations of relationships in accordance with their needs and life goals.

Personal communities are important to the routine functioning of households, are crucial to the management of crises, and are sometimes instrumental in effecting change. They provide havens: a sense of belonging and of being helped. Family and close friends are often counted on to provide routine emotional aid and small services that help one cope with the stresses and strains of various circumstances. When faced with a medical crisis, people typically consult close friends and family. These network members constitute a “therapy managing group” (Pescosolido, 1992, p. 1124) and are partners in the health-management process.

Personal communities are also instrumental in changing situations. As conduits for the exchange of resources, personal communities can often lead to enhanced life chances such as getting advice on important matters (Fischer, 1982), gaining diverse knowledge (Erickson, 1996), and securing a paid job (Granovetter, 1995). They are useful for negotiating barriers, such as formal bureaucratic structures, in everyday life. For example, in pre-market China, close connections with influential friends and family were often invoked to expedite illegal job changes amid tight governmental control (Bian, 1997). Network-led changes in situations often bring about significant improvements in individuals’ mental health, strengthening the overall well-being of the help-seeker (Pescosolido, 1992).

Personal Community and Inequality

While personal communities are channels for the transmission of many benefits, they are also conduits for social control and the reproduction of social inequalities. Ironically, personal communities can themselves be stressors. For example, in some tightly knit ethnic communities, in-group pressures may often aggregate to suppress individual achievement, so that anyone who succeeds beyond the norm may be accused of exchanging his/her ethnic roots for mainstream values (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993).

Personal networks also contribute to the transmission of inequalities within labour markets. With many employers choosing to use insider networks in addition to formal hiring methods, the personal recommendation has become a popular hiring tool for both high-end and low-end jobs (Burt, 1997; Erickson, 2001). From the employer’s point of view, networks reduce screening costs and ensure good-quality candidates, but they may disadvantage those candidates who lack connections (Fernández, Castilla, & Moore, 2000).

The best connections tend to be those that reach up to influential people (Lin, 2001). Influential people are often gatekeepers of useful job information (Marin, 2008) and other forms of knowledge, ranging from sports to literature (Erickson, 1996). Unfortunately, opportunities to reach up are seldom equally distributed in the population. As friendship networks are often stratified by class (Ferrand, Mounier, & Degenne, 1999; Wright & Cho, 1992), people in lower ranks seldom get to add influential contacts to their networks. In the rare event that they do, they reap substantial labour-market benefits (Ooka & Wellman, 2006). Further, it cannot be assumed that job-seekers and information-holders are always willing to cooperate. Studies indicate that the nature of seeker-helper relations is often highly contingent upon the more powerful person being willing to help the less powerful person (Marin, 2008; Smith, 2005).

Conclusions

Personal communities are personal. And yet they are intensively social, spanning social boundaries such as physical continents, social divisions, and other networks. In reality, personal communities are not like the thousands of isolated islands in the Indonesian archipelago but overlap with other social networks to create a system of social interactions resembling a loosely coupled but unmistakably linked social whole (Wellman, 1988). The birth and development of communication technologies such as the Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, and “smartphones” are social affordances that allow people to build communities in new and exciting ways. Because these technologies enable people to talk over large distances as well as to keep short-distance ties, distance has become less of a barrier to the cultivation and maintenance of personal communities.

With the explosive growth of technologies and social affordances, the contemporary world can be said to be undergoing a *triple revolution*: an Internet revolution, a mobile revolution, and a network revolution (Rainie & Wellman, in press). The *Internet revolution* has opened up renewed ways of communicating and finding information. The power of knowledge is no longer the monopoly of professionals, since common folk can now engage the Internet and compare “research notes” with health-care and financial experts.

This Internet revolution is bound up with the *mobile revolution*, which allows individuals to communicate and gather information while on the move. With greater connectivity all around, people can engage their networks and access information regardless of their physical location. Home bases are still important as sources of ideas and inspiration, but the mobile

revolution ensures that we never lose touch with either home base or other important social worlds.

Together, the mobile and Internet revolutions intersect with the *social network revolution*. Although bound up with technology, this third revolution is focused on the intensely social worlds of care and support that they afford to those who have communication access.

The social network revolution is, at its heart, a revolution aimed at sustaining worlds of resource provision, including the social support, comfort, and informality of personal community networks. While networks and social resources remain unevenly distributed within populations, giving rise to inequalities, they continue to be deployed and harnessed by individuals in pursuit of the care and well-being they desire in a sometimes unkind world.

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