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A common challenge in theory and practice of contemporary urban community: theoretical reflections and a case study of Shiroishi, Sapporo

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Summary

This paper considers two issues related to the sociological idea of community in theoretical and practical contexts, in order to discover the reason behind declining urban community.

First, it will reflect on what community actually means, referring to and comparing the understanding of Tönnies who emphasises particularity and MacIver whose understanding implies openness. Partly employing the latter, the author then identifies three key elements of community: namely common purposes and objectives; accumulation of shared activities and experiences; and a sense of belonging, in the context of a locality where regular and collective community practice and activities are possible.

Second the paper explores the issue of declining contemporary urban community. Based on the theoretical understanding of community, and considering primary and secondary data which the author has collected, it will examine an actual case of urban community building efforts of Shiroishi Ward in Sapporo, Japan. It will point out that community's openness to the individual is not sufficiently addressed in community building practice in the area while institutional networking and co-operation, which essentially implies boundaries around it, is encouraged.

A confusion of community's particularity and openness can commonly be seen in theory and in practice. The paper concludes by arguing that this is the major factor of the declining sense of contempo-

rary urban community.

1 Introduction

This paper addresses two key issues around contemporary urban community. First, it theoretically discusses the concept of community so as to clarify what it actually means. The concept is one of the most important in sociology and thus there have been quite a little research into it. However, the sheer amount of research has also caused confusion and vagueness as to what community refers to. This paper will rethink the concept with reference to and comparing the ideas of Tönnies and MacIver in particular, and then identifies three elements of community from the author's viewpoint.

Second, the paper considers why it has long been argued that community has been declining. Based on the theoretical considerations and elements of community, the paper will examine an actual case of urban community of Shiroishi Ward in Sapporo, Japan. This case study will look at the structure of community building efforts in the area and argues that the efforts are mainly for networking and collaboration among institutions/groups.

The paper finally concludes that considering the theoretical reflections and the case study, the declining sense of community today is due to insufficient attention to the individual in the process of community building.

2 Sociological implications and theories of community

2.1 Social solidarity and community in sociology

Sociology has a wide scope and considers a number of social phenomena and issues, many of which are studied in other social sciences as well. A major feature which differentiates sociology from others is that it pays particular attention to social solidarity and analyses social issues logically and scientifically in view of suggesting solutions and developing social theories. This has been practised since the discipline was founded by Comte in the 19th century. He himself was disturbed and inspired by the disintegrated French society following the French Revolution in 1789 and suggested plans for re-establishing social solidarity; this sociological tradition has been highly regarded to date. This paper argues that community forms the basis of solidarity and now presents

sociological reflections on it.

2.2 Theoretical reflections on community

Any one of us has a sense of belonging that needs to be satisfied in one way or another. We are all social beings and un/consciously and/or purposely relate to others by nature and develop and maintain the relations. Our common life is made up of social relations, to put it another way. Those relations range from inter-personal to inter-group/institution. Suzuki (1969) put forward an insightful view on relations in urban settings, and identified three key relations: between people; between people and institutions; and between institutions.

Of these the most fundamental is between people and it is the prerequisite for solidarity through community because it is composed of social relations between people. Here it is useful to distinguish necessary condition from sufficient condition. Social relations can be, for instance, harmonious, co-operative, hostile, or exploitative, meaning that relations between people alone are not sufficient unless they can significantly contribute to social solidarity. Whether social relations' nature and characteristics are communal or not matters; only when communal, can they constitute the sufficient condition.

Now a question arises as to what community/the communal actually means. There have been few clear or definite answers to this question, thereby rendering the concept of community vague and confusing. Consequently, the concept can be understood as 'a plastic word' (The Lumpen Society 1997: 38) which does not have corresponding denotations, as well as 'an omnibus word embracing a motley assortment of concepts and qualitatively different phenomena' (Dixon 1999: 288). Moreover, Hobsbawm even argues that community has been used 'indifferently and emptily' (Hobsbawm 1994: 428), and Blackshaw claims that '[community] means everything but nothing' (Blackshaw 2009: 2). These comments are more than enough to show that it has remained difficult to define the term. Yet, a term should be clarified especially if it is to function as an academic term, while other terms may have a variety of connotations. Thus, the author's original understanding of community is described below, with reference to a comparative examination of two major theories of community.

The concept of community has been discussed by a number of scholars. One of the most well-known of all is the idea of *Gemeinschaft* introduced by Tönnies, which is marked by unity of will, involves ascribed status given by birth, and can be based on shared place and shared belief as well as kinship; this is regarded as the same as

community. Moreover, *Gemeinschaft* has boundaries and individuals within the boundaries share a sense of collectiveness with common mores binding and regulating them at the core (see Figure 1).

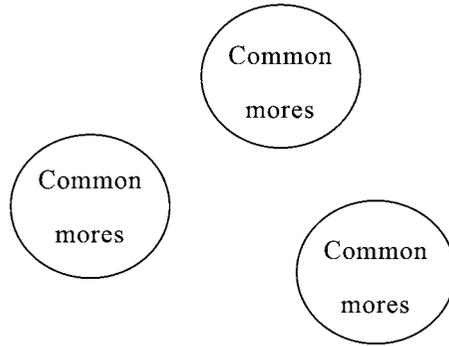


Figure 1: Tönnies's understanding of community (*Gemeinschaft*)

On the other hand, MacIver, who established community as a sociological term, had a different view. He defined community as 'any area of common life, village, or town, or district, or country, or even wider area' (MacIver, 1917: 22). This implies that community refers to common life with territorial flexibility so it can have different forms, as shown in Figure 2.

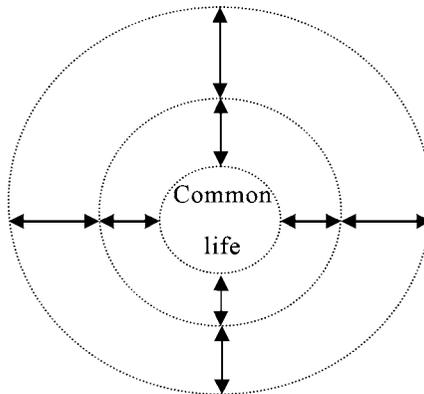


Figure 2: MacIver's understanding of community

In summary, Tönnies situated community within boundaries and implied its particularity and closure, whereas MacIver denied its geographical limits and instead associated it with openness; these views are essentially distinct from each other.

Other existing theories of community are similar to either the former or the latter, and this dichotomy has been causing the concept of community to be confusing and vague. The majority of them highlight particularity, and in fact, many definitions of community include such terms as a group, a particular area, or a place (Wood & Judikis 2002) implying boundaries and closure. For instance, Shaefer and Lamm define community as ‘a spatial or political unit of social organisation’ (Shaefer & Lamm 1999: 415). These definitions with an emphasis on particularity are similar to the concept of association which MacIver introduced at the same time as community. It is similar to community in some ways but different from it; according to MacIver, association refers to ‘an organisation of social beings (or a body of social beings as organised) for the pursuit of some common interest or interests. It is a determinate social unity built upon common purpose’ (MacIver *op. cit.*: 23).

As seen above there are varied views but community is territorially flexible, open, and not rigidly structured. This is particularly so in contemporary society where social relations are no longer static but formed and developed across conventional geographical and social boundaries (Campbell 2000). This in turn underscores the notable difference between community which is open, and association which is circumscribed by boundaries.

Now, however, how do we grasp this idea of open and flexible community as an entity for intellectual considerations? By itself, community is just a vague idea and thus it is meaningful to set a node of community because community functions in our common life provided it has a node; analysis of community can also meaningfully contribute to social solidarity if it identifies a practical node of community which is nonetheless open. It has been pointed out that traditional or predominantly primitive and agricultural societies, which are considered elementary forms of community, did have a node at the centre of common life, for collective and communal management of natural and social resources (Loomis & Beegle 1975). Hillery (1955), who reviewed a number of definitions and interpretations of community, is right about claiming that community needs people in a place, but this only satisfies its necessary condition. Be it a traditional or modern society, a certain node in any form of common life is one of community’s prerequisites. This can be illustrated in Figure 4.

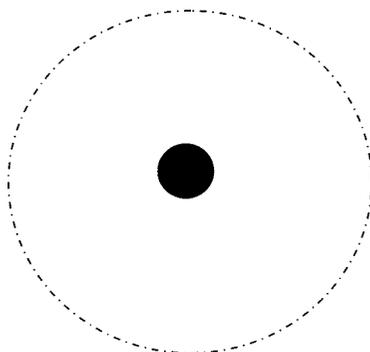


Figure 3: A node in essentially open community

Given the reflections above, this paper argues that a node of community comprises of three elements. These can be represented by A, B, or C, as shown in Table 1 below.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) A (accumulation of shared activities and experiences), 2) B (belonging (a sense of)), and 3) C (common purposes and objectives to work towards) |
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Table 1: Elements of community (The ABC of community)

It is useful to regard community as a process, in which case the order of the A, B, and C above will be C, A, and then B. This is for the following reasons. First, in relation to C, people have, develop, and maintain common life with others so long as we enjoy direct or indirect benefits from it. The same applies to community which is significant part of such common life, and for this reason common purposes and objectives to work towards (the element C) are necessary for bringing people together. Through this C, accumulation of shared activities and experiences (the element A) are possible and there can be synergetic effects between the C and the A, which can eventually lead to the last element B. To put it another way, actual community in common life requires ‘sharing of collective objectives and working towards them’ (Kaneko 2011: i). For this to happen, practical agencies to bring it about are needed.

Discussing community as a process is not novel. For example, Kaneko (2007) identifies three phases, namely, 1) coming together is the beginning; 2) keeping together is progress; and 3) working together is a success. The author of the present paper, however, adds 0) living in an area where regular and collective community practice and activities are possible. This is because although community is essentially open, for systematic

consideration it is necessary to have a certain geographical framework within which it is possible to observe and analyse people’s actual communal activities.

This is presented in Figure 5, based on which the following section will look at a real life example from a contemporary urban society, namely, Sapporo, Japan.

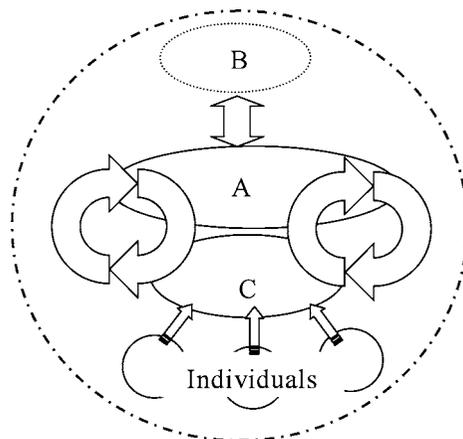


Figure 4: Community’s node

3 A case study of urban community building: Sapporo, Japan

3.1 ‘Liberated’ contemporary urban community

There are numerous types of urban societies and it is not possible to generalise them all. Yet, much of sociological research points out that urban community in the developed world has become increasingly distant from people. Why is that so, what challenges are there?

Wellman (1994) posed a question as to whether community in urban settings was lost, saved, or liberated, which is known as the community question. The first view has been influential and resulted in imaginative or nostalgic quests for community which are often anti-urban (Giddens 1994; Tonkiss 2006).

However, since they are imaginative, many of them are not relevant to actual urban life. It is indisputable that the ongoing modernising process of contemporary society and the spread of urbanism characterised by division of labour, large and dense human settlements, diversity, and anonymity have outdated and largely removed *Gemeinschaft*-like community where life and work spaces are almost the same (Wirth 1938). On top of these are increasing individualisation and declining intermediary groups (Suzuki *et. al.*

2010). Even though these claims are valid, however, the argument of community being lost is an exaggeration (Clements 2008). This is because having been liberated from conventional social structures and relations, community still exists today in parallel with the increasingly significant idea of the individual and open and diversifying social relations. With reference to this idea of contemporary community as an analytical framework, urban community building of Sapporo, Japan is examined below.

3.2 Declining intermediary groups: background to the case study

Sapporo, with a population of a little less than two million, is the fourth most populous city in Japan, after Yokohama, Osaka, and Nagoya. This specially designated city is an interesting case for sociologically important reasons. Referring to statistical data, this section introduces three unique characteristics of Hokkaido where Sapporo is the prefectural capital. This overview will show that the most fundamental intermediary groups which have conventionally embraced individuals, i.e., the family, workplace, and neighbourhood, are comparatively weak in Hokkaido.

First, the family is the most important social institution for individuals. However, it has been notably weak in Hokkaido. For example, the number of persons in a household is 2.31, which is second only to Tokyo's 2.13 persons (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan 2011). In addition, divorce rates are high: 2.42 cases per 1,000 people, which is the third highest after Okinawa (2.60 cases) and Osaka (2.40 cases) (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare of Japan 2009).

Second, workplace has conventionally played a crucial role in providing people of Japan with a sense of belonging but this is fast becoming a thing of the past in Hokkaido. This is because the percentage of temporary workers is 23.9 per cent and this is the third highest in the nation after Kyoto (24.8 per cent) and Osaka (24.1 per cent) (Yano Tsuneta Kinen-kai 2007); this type of employment is contractual and unstable and thus rarely lead to people's collectiveness.

Third, it is also important to pay attention to neighbourhood associations which have been the basis of Japanese society (Yoshihara 2000). A national survey by the Cabinet Office of Japan (2007) shows that more than 70 per cent of Japanese households are members but the membership is decreasing; the rate is 71.8% for Sapporo but it is the lowest in the past 38 years.

Considering the above, it appears inevitable that the level of social capital in Hokkaido is one of the lowest in the country. The next section will analyse how community is

built in Sapporo, the prefectural capital of Hokkaido.

3.3 Community building policies of Sapporo

In order to examine the current state of urban community in Sapporo, it is useful to mention Sapporo's municipal policies for community building. The policies emphasise the role of citizens in community building and local governance. Moreover, community building is defined as activities for all its citizens' comfortable urban life and it is clearly stated that the Community Building Centres and Ward Offices are the central facilities for local community building.

The Community Building Centres (hereinafter referred to as the Centre/s) used to be called Neighbourhood Liaison Offices until they were re-structured and re-named in 2004. There are a total of 87 of them and the areal coverage of each Centre is almost the same as that of a junior secondary school.

According to Sapporo city's publications, the Centres have two functions. First, they still function as the city's local liaison offices. Second, more importantly, they function as the hub of local community building and facilitate networking among local organisations and groups. This paper focuses on the latter function.

In Sapporo, there are also 2,189 neighbourhood associations and these have been the basis of local community. Therefore, in the context of Sapporo, it is important to look at both the Centres and neighbourhood associations and how they have been involved in local community building. The paper also pays attention to Local Community Building Alliance (hereinafter called the Alliance) and its roles. The Alliance's members include neighbourhood associations, PTAs, public schools, local markets, voluntary associations, non-profit organisations and so forth. Its major role is to enhance and facilitate their specialised and joint activities in view of community building. The Alliance's main base of activities is the Centre.

This in turn means that local community building in Sapporo is practised in areas that are the same or smaller in geographical size as or than the Alliance's area of responsibility. The following section will examine how community building on this scale is managed in an area called Higashi Shiroishi in Sapporo.

3.4 The structure of community building in Higashi Shiroishi

As of April 2011, the population and the number of households of Shiroishi Ward were 204,907 persons and 110,773 and 29,149 persons and 17,955 for the Higashi Shiroishi

area, respectively. The number of persons per household in Shiroishi Ward was 1.85, and that in Higashi Shiroishi was 1.62; both these numbers were smaller than 1.96 of Sapporo as a whole.

The Alliance of Higashi Shiroishi was founded in March of 2006. It has Social Welfare Council, Physical Activities Promotion Council, among others in its membership, but the core members are the 16 neighbourhood associations and their Umbrella Committee (hereinafter abbreviated as the Committee). There are these various facilities in place for local community building in the Higashi Shiroishi area.

However, it is very important to point out that the significance of the neighbourhood associations has been declining and their membership is even lower than the average of the whole Sapporo; some 57% of all the households in Shiroishi belong to a neighbourhood association and this is the lowest figure in Sapporo, and more specifically the percentage is 40.8 for Higashi Shiroishi. As mentioned above, it is the neighbourhood associations that are the foundation of community building initiatives through the Centre, the Alliance, or the Committee which are supposed to be inclusive of all the residents in the area. Therefore, it can be argued that the low membership rates for the neighbourhood associations pose challenges for the current municipal policies for local community building.

3.5 The current state of community building in Higashi Shiroishi

The author has been conducting field research in community building in Higashi Shiroishi through examining municipal publications and statistical data made available by the Sapporo City Government, and gathering and analysing information obtained through a series of interviews at the Alliance, the Committee, and the Centre. This section aims to consider the current state of community building in Higashi Shiroishi referring to the community elements A, B, and C, as well as the data gathered.

It is useful to place an emphasis on the structure of the family in the area, namely, small households, decreasing children, and ageing population. It has been pointed out that people living alone do not participate in local community activities as often as those in other types of households (The Cabinet Office of Japan *op. cit.*). A neighbourhood association consists of households. In Higashi Shiroishi, the number of people in a household is small and the neighbourhood associations in the area agree that this is the main factor of the low membership rates. That is, the relatively large proportion of people living alone is reflected in the neighbourhood associations' low membership rates.

Moreover, 71.9% of the residents in the area are between 15 and 64 years of age, which is larger than 69.3% for Shiroishi and 67.6% for Sapporo; there is a relatively large portion of working age population with a small number of children. In fact, children under the age of 15 only constitute 8.8% in Higashi Shiroishi, which is lower than 11.2% for Shiroishi and 11.9% for Sapporo.

The small and/or decreasing number of children has dysfunctions for the element C of community building. Children generally spend much of their time in the neighbourhood because most of their daily activities tend to take place there. Therefore, they can be the key to community building; for instance, they are central to intergenerational activities. The decreasing number of children in Higashi Shiroishi has in turn led to cancellations of children's sport teams, kids' clubs, local summer festivals and so forth.

The percentage of the elderly aged 65 or older in the area is 19.3%, not significantly different from that of Shiroishi or Sapporo as a whole. Yet this ageing social structure has also resulted in cancellations of several community activities, such as neighbourhood watches, intergenerational outdoor activities among others. This demographic trend can have negative implications for or impacts on local community building, even if the community element C is present and shared among residents. Since the C is not put into practice, the A and the B become difficult to achieve. The demographic structure is not only a macro issue but also a micro issue because its impact is felt at grassroots levels.

It can be said that community building in Higashi Shiroishi faces several challenges, even though the neighbourhood associations, the Committee, the Alliance, and the Centre are in place in line with the municipal policies. The main reason for this, this paper argues, is a lack of due attention to the individual; that is, the present structure of community building fails to address the fact that it is individuals that are and must be the basis of community building efforts, but instead much focus is placed on establishment, networking, and collaboration of community building agencies. Behind this is individuals who are not included in the agencies and their activities (see Figure 6). It is reported that around 70% of the citizens of Sapporo have never used any Centre.

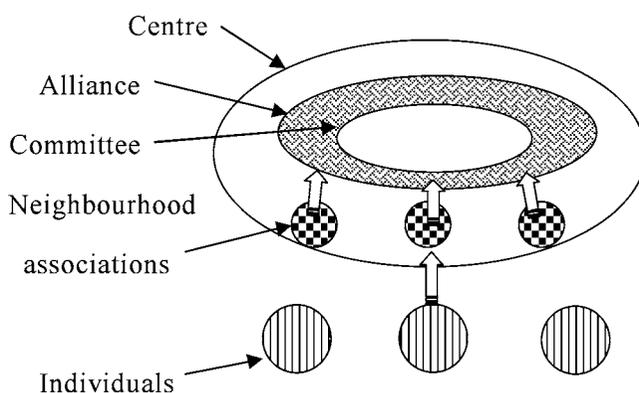


Figure 5: Illustration of the structure and the state of community building in Sapporo

4 Conclusion

This paper has considered two issues related to community in contemporary urban settings. It first reviewed and compared sociological ideas of community put forward by Tönnies and MacIver, before identifying three key elements of community based on the author's own understanding: namely common purposes and objectives; accumulation of shared activities and experiences; and a sense of belonging, in the context of a locality where regular and collective community practice and activities are possible.

It also examined an actual case of community building of Shiroishi Ward in Sapporo, Japan. Referring to primary and secondary data, it has been pointed out that the community building efforts in the area are mainly for networking and collaboration among institutions/groups.

This paper concludes by arguing that the declining sense of contemporary urban community can be largely ascribed to the fact that the idea of the individual tends to be overlooked in the process of community building while institutional/inter-group networking/co-operation are encouraged. This issue is due to a confusion of community and association in practice, as it has also been a major issue in theories of community sociology.

(もりした よしあ・人間システム科学専攻)

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