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Liberated and lost? A paradox of contemporary urban community: with a case study of London, U.K.

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Abstract: Contribution towards solidarity has always been one of the main objectives of sociological studies. The idea of community which this paper reflects upon is at the core of this intellectual endeavour. This is because community constitutes the essential and fundamental part of solidarity; the idea itself has been studied extensively in the sociological tradition and thus is not novel, but it has never been rendered obsolete.

It is generally agreed that a major challenge for urban areas today is promotion of solidarity within increasing diversity and individualisation. There are growing numbers of diverse activities and measures to this end, which essentially quest for and aim to realise urban community where direct and regular social interaction among people takes place in a given local area. However, despite the liberation of community which has made possible such a range of quests and activities, it is also paradoxically claimed that urban community is being lost. This paradoxical issue of community has seldom been addressed in past studies. Thus, in view of identifying its underlying factors, this paper critically examines some major theories of community as the basis for arguments and considerations to follow, and then analyses primary and secondary data which the author has obtained through researching two community building initiatives in London, UK.

Community does not happen by itself; contemporary urban community requires associations as practical agencies with certain areas of specialisation within local social systems. However, associations essentially are focused and closed. Thus they do not necessarily include individuals that are the smallest but most significant components of community; they are often left out of their community building efforts if their affiliation with associations is absent. The paper argues that this is the major factor of the paradox of contemporary urban community in question.

Key words: paradox of urban community, association, community building

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1. A paradox of contemporary urban community as a research question

Sociology has always been concerned with how solidarity in our social life can be promoted. Community constitutes the fundamental part of solidarity; it is where everything is woven and

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spun, providing us with an essential feeling of connectedness, belonging, and meaning (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). It also implies openness and embracement, and carries a warm feel (Bauman, 2001). Because of its relevance to social solidarity, community has remained an important topic to date.

Contemporary urban areas of the developed world, where urbanism as a way of life is widespread, face similar challenges, including difficulty in achieving solidarity due to ever increasing mobility of people, diversification, internationalisation, and social isolation, amongst others; these are closely related to declining local social system. Against this background, there has been renewed attention to promoting, revitalising, and maintaining locality-based community where direct and regular social interaction takes place, and accordingly there has been a wide range of community building initiatives. No matter how and by whom the initiative is organised and practised, and whatever it is called, it quests for community as a locality-based social system based upon locals' collective activities under common purposes and objectives.

Despite increasing numbers of such quests for community, however, it is argued that community has been weakening and being lost (Hiroi, 2007; Clements, 2008; Asakawa & Tamano, 2010). What is behind this paradox? There are a number of studies of community, and many of them either accept community's decline in modern times as the inevitable, or celebrate diversifying initiatives for community building. However, thus far few studies have addressed this paradox of community as a single research question. By reviewing a couple of major theories of community and issues around them, and analysing data which the author has obtained through field research on two cases of community building efforts in London, UK, this paper will cast light on and examine the paradoxical question in view of identifying factors of it.

2. Theoretical considerations of community: disentanglement of dichotomies

Community has been a key idea and it was even claimed that 'much of the reorientation of moral and social philosophy is the consequence of the impact of the rediscovery of community in historical and sociological thought' (Nisbet, 1953: 53). Even so, the concept is vague and has been used not only flexibly but also arbitrarily, causing confusing theoretical dichotomies as to how community is defined, perceived, and built. Through reviewing theories around the dichotomies, the present section aims to disentangle a model of community from them. It will first contrast a couple of major sociological theories of community, before it puts forward the author's own definition of community composed of three elements. This is in order to situate community in relation to association and the individual. Second, it will highlight the aspect of locality and its significance to practical community studies today. Third, referring to three different interpretations of community in modern times, the essence of the paradox of contemporary urban community will be clarified.

How do we understand the important concept of community? There have been attempts to define what community refers to but the concept still remains vague. It has been considered 'a plastic word' (The Lumpen Society, 1997: 38), or 'an omnibus word embracing a motley assortment of concepts and qualitatively different phenomena' (Dixon, 1999: 288), which has been used 'indiscriminately and emptily' (Hobsbawm, 1994: 428). It is hard to define community as '[it]

seems to mean everything but nothing' (Blackshaw, 2009: 2), but it is sociological studies that are to refine and define the concept.

One of the most widely accepted ideas of community in the sociological tradition is that of Gemeinschaft presented by Tönnies. This is perceived to be a tight and cohesive social entity because of the presence of a unity of will. It is best exemplified by family, kinship, place, or belief, and structured with boundaries around it to be cut off from the outside. Another major definition of community was suggested by MacIver who established it as a sociological term. He understood community as 'any area of common life, village, or town, or district, or country, or even wider area' (MacIver, 1917, p.22). Tönnies's idea implies that community is closed, whereas MacIver highlights its openness; that is, the marked difference between the two is whether or not community's boundaries are implied. Due to this dichotomy, most community-related theories can effectively be categorised into two, whether they are grounded in the view of either Tönnies or MacIver.

In turn, this has confused the concept of community, and in some cases elements of both are even mixed up (Wood & Judikis, 2002). In fact, there are more theories oriented towards the former than those towards the latter. For instance, community is regarded as 'a spatial or political unit of social organisation' (Shaefer & Lamm, 1999: 415). In a way, this tendency is understandable. This is because for research purposes it is certainly useful if community can be grasped as some type of organisational entity/group. Yet in that case it is appropriate to use the concept of association instead, which means '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, *ibid*.: 23). Thus, although it is often argued that the difference between community and association is increasingly negligible (Yoshihara, 2011), this paper adopts MacIver's view which recognises community's openness.

Now, how can we model community theoretically? Past studies have effectively analysed elements of the established structure of community (Suzuki, 1978; Kaneko, 2007). However, to focus more on how community is built, as needed in urban areas today, this paper maintains that community is comprised of three elements: 1) common purposes and objectives are shared among people; 2) the people have roles to play and their shared activities and experiences are accumulated through organised and collaborative efforts; and 3) their sense of belonging is fostered. Thus, community here is a threefold process (see Table 1).

The three elements will be referred to as Element C, A, and B, respectively. As for Element C, we generally lead social life as we individuals are dependent upon and benefit from one another in a variety of ways. The same logic applies to community where our social life is more collective and specific with certain common purposes and objectives shared among us who can otherwise remain unrelated individuals. That is, the prerequisite for community is that there are people who have social relations conducive to collective community building[1]. This can lead to

Table 1: Elements of community

1. C (common purposes and objectives to work towards)
2. A (accumulation of shared activities and experiences)
3. B (belonging (a sense of)), and

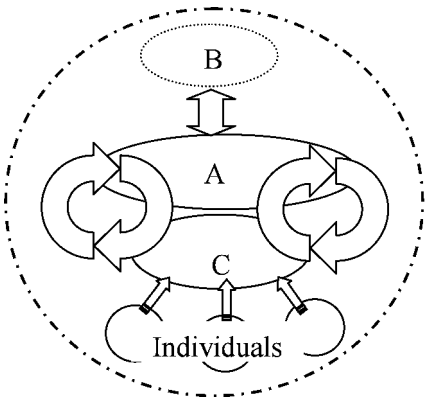

Figure 1: Elements and structure of community

Element A, i.e., accumulation of share activities and experiences, which is the basis for the next Element B (see Figure 1).

It is also important to note that community does not happen by itself even if the above prerequisite is satisfied; there needs to be an agency that triggers and forms community's node. The paper regards associations as intermediary groups between us and community which act as the central agency to realise community; associations are to create community which is open to any individual who wishes to take part in it.

The model of open community described above needs refining, however. Since the 'cultural turn' (Delanty, 2003), there has been another theoretical dichotomy between the idea of cultural community and that of social community. The former highlights community's flexibility and openness on a wider scale than the latter and is typically concerned with common cultures, religions, ideologies, etc. (Queralt, 1995), while the latter focuses on more local issues. The problem is that both of these can adopt the open community model, allowing community to be interpreted arbitrarily. As the main objective is to address challenges in urban settings by building social community, the fundamental Element C should be explicitly locality-based. In this respect, the claim that people's coming together is the beginning (Kaneko, 2011) is ambiguous. Thus, this paper focuses on city- or smaller levels where many actual urban community building measures and activities are organised and practised.

According to the 'Community Question' posed by Wellman (1979), community in urban areas can be interpreted as lost, saved, or liberated through modernisation. Yet another theoretical dichotomy is present here; many views on contemporary community have tended to be rooted in either the lost or the liberated thesis (Sonoda, 2002). This paper partially agrees with the liberated thesis because community today has been liberated from social restraints, not necessarily limited to geographically circumscribed areas, and can be flexibly created. In relation to this last dichotomy, however, it is crucial to point out the limitation of both of these widely quoted lost and liberated theses of Wellman. The rationale for this criticism is that the theses are independent of each other and thus not particularly useful to examining the main issue of contemporary urban community discussed in this paper, i.e., the paradox that community is being lost following/despite its liberation[2]. To find out why this paradox is the case, it is necessary to analyse the

actual state of urban community, looking beyond the resignation of the lost thesis and the optimistic implication of the liberated thesis.

So as to solve the present research question, this paper sets two hypotheses based upon the preceding theoretical considerations. 1) Theoretically, the main feature of community is its openness towards individuals in a given local area. 2) However, in contemporary urban areas, this has tended to be overlooked in community building efforts through associations, thereby leading to declining community. Alongside these hypotheses, the following section will critically examine two cases of community building that the author has been researching in the context of London, UK.

3. Challenges for urban community building: case studies of London, UK

In the UK, community building via associations has been a nationally high priority, particularly since the end of the 1970s (Kaji & Iizuka, 2006). This has embodied liberated community in terms of diversification of associations and people's voluntary and flexible involvement in their activities. However, there has also been 'a fear of social disintegration and a call for a revival of community' (Giddens, 1994: 124)[3]. This matches the urban community paradox in question.

Two cases of community building practice by associations called 1) London Citizens in London (city-level), and 2) Kensington and Chelsea Social Council in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (borough-level) are analysed below. The analysis is presented examining data which the author has been gathering since December 2009 from official sources and publications of the associations, as well as from participant observation, participation in community building activities, and un/semi-structured interviews with such people as staff members of the associations, locals, and local officials and police officers. This field research has aimed to consider the extent to which the liberated communities being built in the respective areas are consistent with the sociological model of community, in an attempt to see how the initiatives are related to the community paradox.

At the city level, London Citizens (referred to as the LC below), which calls itself 'the national home of community organising', has been promoting 'community across diversity' since its establishment in 1996. The LC has a staff of 33 at several branches in the city and acts as an umbrella of some 180 member organisations which include religious organisations, educational institutions, trade unions, and so forth. Of its several main activities, Living Wage Campaign and CitySafe Campaign (mentioned below as the LWC and the CSC, respectively) are analysed here.

After agreed upon at the general assembly, the LWC began in 2001 and is considered the most successful campaign of the LC. The common objective is to persuade employers in the city to pay their workers the living wage (GBP 8.30) which is higher than the national minimum wage (GBP 6.08) due to the high cost of living. To achieve this objective, the LC mobilises members of its member organisations, negotiates with employers, lobbies, and stage street demonstrations. It also recognises employers that agree to pay the living wage as Living Wage Employers and there are more than 100 of them in the city. The CSC was launched in 2008 with the common

objective of tackling street crimes and anti-social behaviour, such as vandalism, verbal and physical abusing, and graffiti. The LC and its members team up with shop owners on some High Streets where such offenses frequently occur and report any crime to the police. The shop owners on the team also display CSC stickers and are responsible for protecting people seeking safety from street crimes. There are over 200 such shops in the city.

What implications do these campaigns have for community building from the sociological perspective? First, the LWC has been the long-term common objective shared among the LC's member organisations and able to bring their members together for over a decade. That is, the campaign has made an effective node of collectiveness and collaboration at the city level. Furthermore, it won more than GBP 60 million from Living Wage Employers between 2005 and 2010 (Wills, 2010). The accumulation of shared activities and experiences through the LWC has formed a solid basis for the LC's other campaigns. Second, the more recent CSC has also been an important common agenda of the LC's strategy as street safety concerns its members as it does the general public. There are initiatives for safe streets by public authorities and the police. For instance, there have been around 7,500 security cameras installed on the streets of London (cf. as opposed to just over 300 in Paris), and a new community police scheme to increase local police visibility with additional officers has been in place. However, these can only supplement the CSC which is embedded in the locality-based collective efforts. The success of these two campaigns of the LC has contributed towards accumulating shared activities and experiences which are vital for community building in the diverse urban area where sharing of a common agenda is a challenge. Furthermore, it has fostered the member organisations' additional and shared sense of belonging to and identification with the LC (Wills, 2007). Thus, their city-wide liberated community building has produced considerable results.

However, on the following grounds the LC's community building through these campaigns is not compatible with the community model described earlier. 1) At the core of the campaigns is 'the common good' which is agreed upon by its member organisations. This common good has a bridging function across their diversity, and at the same time it has a bonding function amongst these organisations in the LC's membership. The problem, however, is that the common good implies that the LC's community is closed towards those organisations which do not adopt it. This is not in line with the community model which highlights its openness. 2) The LC has in its membership 'key' and 'well-organised' institutions. Consequently, around 60% the membership concentrates in religious organisations and educational institutions because they tend to meet the criteria and have principles and policies that can readily be translated into practical activities[4]. Yet, it is also important to note that there is no individual membership of the LC, and thus individuals are literally outside of the LC's community unless they are affiliated with its member organisations. Individuals with no affiliation may benefit from the LC's campaigns indirectly but remain beneficiaries with no chance of active involvement in them. 3) The number of active members of the member organisations who regularly participate in the campaigns is estimated at 'around 8%', and this small proportion despite its large membership is not negligible because unity may be fostered between the member organisations but not necessarily among the members of the organisations.

Next, the case of Kensington and Chelsea Social Council (mentioned as the KCSC below)

is considered. It is part of the Community Strategy of the borough which has two main pillars. The first pillar is to promote activities of various associations of the voluntary and community sector (referred to as the VC sector below) in the borough. As of August of 2010, there were as many as 593 such associations operating in specialised fields including street safety, public health, cultural conservation, children's welfare, art, caring for older people, and training for the youth. Through division of labour among these VC-sector associations, the borough's local social system is organised. It also facilitates collaboration among the associations. In fact, around 85% of them have operational relations with other associations. For instance, there is a collaborative project called 4minds which involves 4 different associations. This project's common objective is to support residents of minority ethnic backgrounds in the north of the borough, through providing assistance in mental health care in several languages. The second pillar of the Strategy is to encourage residents of the borough to participate in activities of VC-sector associations of their own choice, whereby their sense of belonging and self-esteem are expected to be fostered and fulfilled and their individual local social relations built.

However, the Strategy has a dysfunction in terms of community building in the sociological sense. 1) Associations are responsible for specialised functions but this in turn means fragmentation of the local social system as a whole. 2) Moreover, collaborative efforts of multiple associations are often on a contract basis and conducted for an average of around 2 to 3 years, as is in the case of 4minds. Therefore, this contract-based community building does not necessarily lead to development of new and additional common purposes or objectives in the locality, due to difficulty in achieving prolonged relations between partner associations through accumulation of shared activities and experiences. 3) Around 90% of VC-sector associations in the borough operate city-wide, as it is legitimate and reasonable for them to provide services wherever there is demand. Yet this means that the borough does not enjoy all the benefits of their activities despite its aim of promoting borough-level local community. Given the above, although the Strategy embodies liberated urban community in the sense that it encourages individual-based social participation in specialised associations of their own interest and concern, it does not mean that community as a collective local social system is built[5].

4. Conclusion

In order to identify factors of the paradox that liberated community in today's urban settings is being lost despite a range of measures and activities, this paper has theoretically considered the sociological concept of community, and critically examined two cases of urban community building in London, UK.

Although limited in scope and quantity, the findings presented above indicate crucial challenges for building of locality-based liberated community via VC-sector associations and people's participation in them. Such community building efforts certainly are effective in various ways; associations are necessary for the realisation of community as they are the central agency of it. For instance, they identify local needs and areas of operation which are sharable in today's diverse urban setting, and produce significant positive results. They also provide individuals with opportunities for relating to others through their activities. However, they are often

incompatible with the sociological model of community which has been disentangled from the theoretical reflections; they tend to centre around specialised functions and goals of associations and serve beneficiaries, which is perfectly reasonable in its own right, yet they lack due attention to locality-based collectiveness of individuals that theoretically form the basis of the open community. This seems to lie in the contemporary urban community paradox which has been discussed throughout this paper. Therefore, it should be fair to argue that the hypotheses put forward earlier, i.e. 1) theoretically, the main feature of community is its openness towards individuals in a given local area, and 2) however, in contemporary urban areas, this has tended to be overlooked in community building efforts through associations, thereby leading to the decline of community in question, have been proven valid.

Today's liberated urban community is at a turning point of loss or creation. Analysis of other cases of locality-based community building and reflection on how individuals' social relations through associations can be amalgamated to form community are two of the outstanding tasks of this research. Community is not a novel idea in sociology, but it is still relevant and useful to the research into contemporary urban life and challenges with the aim of promoting solidarity.

Endnotes

1) This paper distinguishes community from social capital which is composed of an individual's networks, trust, and reciprocity, but does not necessarily mean collectiveness.
2) Other studies tend to overlook the difference between the loss or decline of primary groups and the contemporary declining community after/despite liberation.
3) The number of associations in the voluntary and community sector is estimated between 500,000 and 900,000 (Clements, 2008: 5).
4) However, it is worthwhile noting that 20% of the British do not have a religion and even of Christians that account for 80% of the population 3% of them practice their religion.
5) The frequency of British people's participation in VC-sector activities has been declining over the past decade (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

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