

Arts, Agency and Community Engagement

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Introduction

A number of social theorists have argued that the notion of ‘community’ is, at best, vague and ambiguous or, even worse, that it creates outdated and romanticized notions of social norms that are oppressive to those who don’t fit such norms.¹ As Hobsbawm suggests: ‘Never was the word “community” used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life’.² More recently Walmsley began a review on ‘the nature of community’ by saying that the word has been used so loosely for so long that it now has a ‘high level of use but a low level of meaning’. Nevertheless, he argued that the term ‘community’ reflects aspirations for forms of social life that are gaining in their appeal and that we need to investigate some of the more constructive ways in which the term is being used to enhance social life.³

Many of those who want to rescue the word community from its most narrow, romanticized or utilitarian usages turn back to the distinction made as long ago as 1877 by Ferdinand Tönnies between *gemeinschaft* communities, which are relatively stable and feature established networks and relationships based on mutual obligation and *gesellschaft* communities, in which people are far more mobile and concerned with individual self-interest.⁴ While Tönnies was writing at a time when masses of people were moving out of established rural communities to seek work in the burgeoning cities as a result of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, his terminology has been used to argue that local communities can display a mixture of the two characteristics and that some *gesellschaft* communities can regain at least some of the characteristics of *gemeinschaft* communities.⁵

While Tönnies’ work was certainly important and there are still plenty of rural local communities in the world that display *gemeinschaft* characteristics, the changing nature of local communities in the intervening 130 years, and particularly its reconstitution through processes of globalization, heavily qualifies the usefulness of Tönnies’ work. Part of the problem with discussing community within the context of globalization is that much of the literature on globalization

has limited usefulness in understanding community. Indeed it is only relatively recently that some scholars have recognized the 'lure of the local' in connection with global change.⁶ Paul James has argued that accelerated globalization has not resulted in the replacement of old social formations with new ones but rather an increased layering of social life from local face-to-face communities through to more abstracted and spatially extended communities (the nation and beyond). People belong simultaneously to 'communities' that operate at different levels of abstraction and instead of focusing on one or another aspect of this multilayered existence we need to examine how these levels interact.⁷

However, we need to keep in mind that we live at a time when shared narratives, and their frameworks of meaning, have been weakened and individual self-identity has become, in Ulrich Beck's terms, a 'do-it-yourself biography'.⁸ Less and less is prescribed by external agents and events and more and more has to be chosen and re-chosen, negotiated and renegotiated. While it would be difficult to sustain the thesis that the contemporary world is more fragmented than was the case in the past, the kinds of fragmentation now seem to cut deeper. There are fewer overarching structures and institutions through which individuals might negotiate socio-political fragmentation.

While such institutions of the past could be stifling and oppressive, they also gave people a relatively secure sense of who they were and how they ought to live.⁹ Contemporary life, at least in the West, but also including more generally, is increasingly governed by what Richard Sennett calls the maxim of 'no long term'.¹⁰ In such circumstances, individuals are increasingly forced to use their own resources to develop a coherent sense of self and identity; to develop narratives of self that help to create a degree of stability. For some this new 'freedom of expression' can be liberating, while for others it can be disorienting, offering little more than evanescent and contingent reference points. Consequently, individuals appear more isolated when it comes to negotiating fragmented social spaces.

Researchers at the Globalism Institute at RMIT University recently completed a three-year study for the health promotion agency VicHealth on the role that community arts and celebrations can play in enhancing the wellbeing of local communities in Victoria.¹¹ As part of this study we interviewed people attending a range of community festivals and celebrations and we also used a photonarrative technique to find out more about the lived experience of community. The photonarrative technique involved giving cameras to the people involved so that they could collect images of their daily experiences and then discuss these images in interviews with the researchers. This activity was carried out in the local communities centred on the inner-urban suburb of St Kilda, the outer-urban suburb of Broadmeadows, the rural township of Daylesford (just over one hour's drive from Melbourne) and the regional centre of Hamilton in Victoria's western district. The outcomes were a little surprising.

Reflections on the changing nature of community life

The photonarrative interviews gave some insight into such changes at the level of community life: of the abiding bonds of community being overtaken, restructured, and reconstituted by forces of more mobile, fleeting forms of

association celebrated by the boosters of neo-liberal globalisation. An interviewee who lived in an apartment complex on St Kilda Road, for instance, spoke of the fast-changing nature of his community. He mentioned that he knew the people who had lived in the building for a long time because he recognized their cars in the car park. The arrival and departure of other residents of the complex was registered by signs advertising furniture and appliances being posted on the apartment noticeboard as residents prepared to vacate the building. There was a sense here of community in a constant process of flux, created, dissolving and re-created. Perhaps not surprisingly, this interviewee reported that he did not feel that he was part of his community and that his parents had a stronger experience of community than he did.

There were other signs of community being overlaid by processes and activities that went beyond and worked to re-frame the local bonds of community. A common theme amongst the interviewees was that face-to-face community was under threat from a variety of processes variously described as centralization or corporatization. Such concerns typically emerged when people were invited to reflect on whether community life was weakening, strengthening or staying pretty much the same. An interviewee in St Kilda, for instance, said her community was becoming 'more corporate' as large corporations displaced smaller shops, producing a more anonymous street life which was seen as having a negative impact on the kinds of community who were likely to settle and live in St Kilda:

Unless the eclectic-ness still attracts those who have those qualities – if we can maintain that, then people will still want to live here and express that. But if it gets too Becton [a large property developer], too development, too Jeans West [a clothing chain store], then you'll get an average kind of mindset.¹²

While specific corporations were mentioned, these seemed intended more as specific examples of a more general way of life which was experienced as hostile to stable, settled forms of community, where individuals could develop a coherent identity and narrative. One respondent spoke about changes to the local library claiming that it was

... one of those meeting places that keeps people connected. The local librarian knows all the town gossip because people come in and blab. Old people come in and bring her cakes, probably more for a yak than the books, so it is another one of those institutions which they keep wanting to streamline and corporatize and privatize and fuck up. If they left them alone they would be fine. They are important.¹³

Another interviewee from Daylesford mentioned his frustration with a local service station, which seemed to be representative of the impersonality of large chains, in opposition to the community that he had known:

I hate our Shell service station with a passion. Our local service station may employ a few workers, but the workers don't work for the community. I've been in there many times, [and] because I'm not a very rich person ... they treat us with contempt. As soon as I hang my bowser up, she'll see me

coming and grab her computer and leave me hanging around until she's good and ready to serve me.¹⁴

This concern with the impact of corporations is not focused on particular corporations but rather a perception that corporations in general represent a whole way of life which was seen as being impersonal and hostile to the rhythms of community life. One interviewee illustrated the general theme, arguing that community was weakening because of the economic changes and the rise of corporations. The weakening of community, he said, had 'to do with having a job':

This thing at the moment of forcing people into work who are on pensions and on welfare. I'm all for that – except, exactly what jobs are these people going to do? Where are the jobs? What are they going to do? Is it going to earn them an adequate wage or is it going to give them pride, is it going to feed into their wellbeing and self-esteem? You get me started. It's to do with democracy, it's being supplanted by 'corpocracy' which is really the whole world being run by corporations ... Corporations and stock markets are driving marginal people out of a meaningful life.¹⁵

In contrast to this picture of globalization, he offered what he called the 'cliche of the tea-lady'. 'She had a pride – those sorts of jobs just don't exist anymore'.¹⁶

Arts and the Construction of Narratives of Action

The reference to the tea lady highlights the personal consequences of the changing nature of community within conditions of globalization. It summons up a loss of identity. As local communities have been buffeted and reconstituted by processes of globalization, the sources of individual identity seem more precarious and the way to go forward less clear. Within this changed context, the arts can play a role in providing a sense of narrative and purpose, and so facilitate a sense of agency, offering people the means of piecing together the fragments of life and a coherent sense of self.

Meryl, a female festival attendee commented that she had been involved with numerous other community arts events over a fifteen year period. She noted 'I have gained friends, confidence and community links. [These are] VERY important to who I am today'.¹⁷ Clearly, Meryl's involvement in community arts had been an important source of community and identity. Yet it must be noted that this was over a 15-year period of being centrally involved. This suggests that short-term participation in community arts is not a short-cut or a quick-fix to questions about managing identity. It requires considerable investment of time and energy.

This provides some support to the concern expressed by many community arts practitioners who maintain that funding often only allows for short-term projects that do not encourage the more beneficial longer-term involvement. To 'get something' from the community respondents reported having to put something in, as Meryl had done: in her case, many hours over a long period of time. Rather than offering an escape hatch, the arts offer a means of managing such uncertainty, of reflexively building and re-building the conditions of life.

Perhaps more striking still is an interviewee who lives in a rooming house in St Kilda. He used art—creative writing—to give a sense of narrative and structure to his life. The interviewee was a resident of a rooming-house and had had various problems with drugs and alcohol over the years. His community was primarily the people in the rooming house who, he said, were dealing with ‘drug problems and depressions’. ‘The only problem with these sorts of communities,’ he explained further, ‘is that there are lots of people with their own problems. So it’s not easy to live in environments like this’. Asked if the community was valuable to him, he answered, ‘No, not at all. Not this community at all. You need to stay away from this sort of environment, otherwise things just snowball. You get people drinking, and next minute you are too. That’s how it all starts’.¹⁸

He used art as a means to construct an identity outside of alcoholism and drug use. He is a keen runner and writes one-page stories about his life and his experience every day. The walls of his modest room were decorated with two heart-shaped sculptures made out of found objects. He explained that one was for running and the other was for writing, both of which had to be done properly and for the right reasons. As he explained, the hearts are:

... a reminder for me that there are two things I need to do from the heart. If I didn’t do that I would get all confused... It’s important for me to do my one-page story every day. Just a one one-page story. I tread a very fine line with what I do. It’s very important for me to do these things, and to do things properly as well. Otherwise there’s no sense in doing it if I am not doing it properly.¹⁹

For this interviewee, art is central to his identity and his sense of himself. As we shall see in a moment, writing also provided a means to manage his engagement with a difficult and, in many respects, threatening community.

Another interviewee from the rural town of Daylesford, provided a similarly stark example of the role of arts and community in affording some sense of identity and narrative. The interviewee had been dealing with depression after a road accident. He had begun attending a local men’s group called the ‘men’s shed’ oriented to manual projects, ranging from mechanical repairs to artistic practice. Asked what he got out of the men’s shed, the interviewee responded immediately:

Well it gets me out of bed. If it wasn’t for the men’s shed, I don’t think I would be here today. It gives me the will to get out of bed. It involves my kids and my whole family. The men are now a part of my family, knocking on the door.²⁰

He had become active in the lives of the other men who came to the shed and played an organizing and co-ordinating role. After recovering from the serious road accident, attending the shed had become a large part of this man’s recovery and life, adjusting to a new sense of who he was.

Exercising Choice in Forms of Engagement

In making these comments about art, narrative and agency, we should not be taken to be romanticizing engagement in community or claiming that the interviewees entered into community in an uncritical way. Such would suggest

surrender to community as opposed to agency. For some interviewees, art was a means to negotiate and manage engagement with community. As mentioned above, one man in a rooming house did this by writing a short story every day. By composing short stories about his own life experiences and sharing them with others, he had found a way to connect to his community and manage a relation to it, while keeping away from drugs and alcohol. In his own words:

I use my writing to help people. I give it to them and walk away. That way I don't take any of this shit on. I'm not a counsellor, and I don't want to be a counsellor – just yet anyway. I am trying to teach people that they can live a normal life.²¹

This 'inclusion-at-a-distance' made possible a mediated relationship with his community, enabling a form of participation in community life that was characterized simultaneously by inclusion and exclusion. As such, arts and culture should not be seen as automatically inclusive in the sense of creating tightly-knit communities where everyone knows one another. In this instance, art was quite consciously used to maintain a distance between oneself and others.

This was not confined to participants dealing with alcoholism and depression. Other respondents did not necessarily seek tight-knit forms of community, or even see these as necessary to health and wellbeing. Another photonarrative participant, for example, was typical in his preference to opt in and out of the different communities of which he was a member. His own way of putting this was to say 'I'm not by nature a club person. I'd love to be a club person, I'd love to be a team person but it's not in my nature'. Consistent with this view, on the question of health and participation in community, he did not think it necessary to have strong connections to community for wellbeing. While he believed that tightly knit communities could be good for people's health, he also thought that communities which were characterized by what might be called 'cool civility' – that is, where people are polite and considerate in their dealings with each other, but not especially involved with their lives – were equally beneficial to wellbeing. In this respondent's view, it was only when a community worked to actively undermine an individual's wellbeing, through violence for example, that it affected wellbeing.²²

A similar sentiment was reported by the interviewee in Daylesford. Asked if he thought that community could impact on people in negative ways, he replied:

Sure. When the community is a rigid hierarchy, or where there is a lack of tolerance to varying forms of behaviour ... all those things, if you don't fit the mould then you are in trouble. My father's family comes from a tiny town in the Mallee on the South Australian border. Gossip in those sorts of towns can be vicious.²³

Such responses complicate official policies of social inclusion, insofar as they suggest that inclusion within a community is not always a good thing, or even desired by individuals. At the very least, they suggest that individuals need to be empowered to negotiate their own inclusion in community, rather than it being seen as a desirable policy goal imposed in a top-down manner.

Community arts and cultural events do not necessarily overcome such problems and may even constitute a barrier to the goal of social inclusion. For example, one participant at a community event wrote about a 'lack of inclusiveness'. This respondent felt 'the energy was closed and clicky [sic], not embracing'.²⁴ This contrasted with another participant who noted 'we only just arrived and are already excited about being here – the music, the colour, the sense of community, happy people being themselves and enjoying life!'²⁵ Agreeing with the community themes, another female attendee noted: 'The Kingfisher festival [held annually in Melbourne] is a stand-out every year – community atmosphere unlike other festivals, I attend approximately 10–15 per year'.²⁶ It is possible that within the same event, those who are part of the wider community and have been for some time, or find something in common with the group feel immediately part of the community while others feel excluded.

While different people get very different things out of participating in community art activities, it is clear that forms of creative expression can help people construct self-narratives that provide a sense of meaning in a changing, and often threatening, world. At their best, such self-narratives can also give people a stronger sense of agency.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, I.M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1990; and E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, Michael Joseph, London, 1994.

² E. Hobsbawm. *The Age of Extremes*, p. 428.

³ J. Walmsley, 'Putting Community in Place', *Dialogue*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2006, pp. 5–12.

⁴ See, for example, J. Walmsley, 'Putting Community in Place'; and S. Lowe, 'Creating Community: Art for Community Development', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2000, pp. 357–386.

⁵ See S. Lowe, 'Creating Community: Art for Community Development'.

⁶ See, for example, M. Featherstone, 'Localism, Globalism and Cultural Identity', in R. Wilson and W. Dissanayake, eds, *Global, Local*, Duke University Press, Durham, USA, 1996; and L. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicultural Society*, The New Press, New York, 1997.

⁷ See P. James, *Nation Formation: Towards a Theory of Abstract Communities*, Sage, London, 1996; T. Nairn and P. James, *Global Matrix: Nationalism, Globalism and State-Terrorism*, Pluto, London, 2005; and P. James, *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In*, Sage, London, 2006.

⁸ U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage, London, 1992, p.135.

⁹ See, for example, J. Brett and A. Moran, *Ordinary Peoples' Politics: Australians Talk About Politics, Life and the Future of their Country*, Pluto, North Melbourne, 2006, pp. 10–11 and 15–47.

¹⁰ R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the*

New Capitalism, W.W. Norton, New York, 1998.

¹¹ M. Mulligan, K. Humphery, P. James, C. Scanlon, P. Smith and N. Welch, *Creating Community: Celebrations, Arts and Wellbeing within and across Local Communities*, VicHealth, Melbourne.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

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