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The Re-Invention of Sociology of Community

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Abstract

In today's society the term 'Community' is frequently used. Politicians, religious leaders, policy makers and the media are repeatedly utilizing the concept to describe a particular scenario. Traditionally, sociologists have been fascinated with community, within a theoretical and geographical context. At the centre of the community is the debate of how external agencies work with the local community and how social policy can work at a local level. The aim of this paper is to critically explore the debate around community and how the subject has re-established itself within the discipline of sociology. To justify the arguments surrounding the Sociology of Community the author uses a case study of The United Kingdom.

Keywords: Big Society, Community Studies; Institutions, Social Capital.

1. Introduction

"If community studies are to be undertaken they must be justified as one would justify any piece of sociological research, i.e. they must make it possible either (i) to test already existing propositions or (ii) to explore for hypotheses within a given conceptual framework. In particular one must expect of such studies that they should provide data in answer to questions about how particular aspects of society work, which may be drawn together to develop an understanding of the larger 'how' of social systems in general. Such can also provide the data upon which those theoreticians who wish to answer the question 'why society?' can develop their ideas" (Stacey, 1969, p. 134).

The above citation is from the sociologist Margaret Stacey in reference to the myth of community studies. As this quote demonstrates the subject of community studies centres on how communities 'work' within a complex society. There are other renowned sociologists who have written on the subject of community studies, namely, Colin Bell, Steven Cohen, Gerald Delaney, Joseph Gusfield, and Howard Newby. In sociological terms community studies would be known as the 'Sociology of Community.' The idea around the Sociology of Community perceives the notion of social phenomena. Goe and Noonan (2007, p. 455) have noted referring to the work of Joseph Gusfield (1975) that there are two foremost traditions of community, they are:

1. ‘The concept is used to refer to a physical territory, or geographic area, where human beings reside and/or work;
2. Community is used to refer to the quality or character of human relationships that bind persons to each other to form a social group.’

Today, the term ‘community studies’ is rarely used and it is more fashionable to use the term ‘Community’ or ‘Community Development.’ Both these words are commonly used by politicians, the media, policy makers and scholars. Somerville (2011, p. 1) has argued that the nature of community is a complex one and must be taken ‘seriously’ due the concept being ‘multidimensional’ and ‘contested.’ Moreover, when it comes to community development the term is seen from an international perspective and as Phillips and Pittman (2009, p. 4) note ‘community development as a profession has deep roots, tracing its origins to social movements.’ In both cases the terms are perceived to be a positive analogy of how a society should work for the benefits of the people and that if a particular problem occurs then the local community can have a helpful influence. As Stacey (1987, p. 317) argues:

“Community goes far beyond mere local community, is a fusion of feeling and thought, of tradition and commitment, of membership and volition. Community is founded on people conceived in their wholeness, rather than in one or other of the roles, taken separately, that they may hold in the social order.”

In this paper it will be argued that subject of community studies has had a long establishment within the discipline of social sciences and has become more prevalent over recent times. This paper is structured into two sections. The first section critically examines the historical contribution of community studies in the field of sociology and its wider influence on other social science subject areas. The second section provides an analytical discussion on how the topic of community studies has responded to the changing agenda in today’s society. The paper is a theoretical piece, which has focused on academic literature.

2. The Historical Influence

“Social and political scientists, historians, and philosophers have been divided on their use of the term community, leading many to question its usefulness. But virtually every term in social science is contested, and if we reject the word community we will have to replace it with another term. In general, for sociologists community has traditionally designated a particular form of social organisation based on small groups, such as neighbourhoods, the small town, or a spatially bounded locality” (Delanty, 2003, p. 2).

When examining the historical influences of community studies there are many social science scholars who have written on the subject area. One of the most prominent scholars on the debates on community is Ferdinand Tönnies a German Sociologist. Tönnies developed two strands of school of thought: (1) ‘Community’ that is reference to social groups on the foundation of the feeling of togetherness and thus the creation of a mutual bond. (2) ‘Association’ that refers to social groups being instrumental for residents living in their community. Turner (1999, p. 92) has noted that Ferdinand Tönnies’ well known difference between ‘*gemeinschaft*’ (community) and ‘*gesellschaft*’ (association) ‘was a crucial contribution to the subsequent that modern societies are fragile and superficial, because they are not grounded in lasting values.’ In this sense Tönnies perceived the development of communities as one of a variation of complexities that bringing many social challenges to the community. However, Gottdiener and Budd (2005, p. 12) have noted that idea ‘of a traditional

community is over used as applicable to modern societies while the term ‘community’ is itself so loosely used as to have little specific meaning.’

Social scientists, particularly, sociologists and human geographers, have been fascinated with urban challenges within a city. As Mooney and Neal (2009, p. 13) note ‘for early urban sociologists, towns and cities have offered places or neighbourhoods in which – despite the heterogeneity and size of the city – community-based social relations could be identified.’ The most historical case to note is the Chicago School of Social Ecology. Scholars of Robert Park, Ernest Burgess Roderick McKenzie and Louis Wirth have had a profound and lasting effect on how cities work within the discipline of social science. Their work, which was published in 1925, examines the urban settlement of the City of Chicago. In the volume a definition of community is provided:

“The simplest possible description of a community is this: a collection of people occupying a more or less clearly defined area. But a community is more than that. A community is not only a collection of people, but it is a collective of institutions. Not people, but institutions, are final and decisive in distinguishing the community from other social constellations.” (Park, 1967, p. 115).

The four scholars perceived the creation of a community as a biological feature. As Herbert and Thomas (1990, p. 131) note ‘the concept of community is borrowed directly from biology, was applied to the city as a population group inhabiting a distinguishable geographical space and coexisting through a set of symbiotic relationships.’ Herbert and Thomas (1990) go on to add that Park, Burgess, McKenzie and Wirth saw the population group within Chicago as a natural order of the community which was ‘territorially organised and ‘interdependent.’ Research carried out by David Harvey (1973, p. 91) has noted that:

“There are various natural forces making for territorial organisations in an urban system: kinship and ethnic groupings, communities with shared value systems, individuals with similar ideas about quality of urban environment, are good examples. These forces do not remain static.”

Harvey (1973, p. 91) moves on to argue that traditional wisdom of ‘community’ and ‘neighbourhoods’ are being replaced by social organisation. He says that social organisations can ‘minimize conflict’ and ‘maximise group coherence and efficiency.’ There are various definitions of a social organisation but the main characteristic of a social organisation is whereby people in society are structured by a pattern of relationships (Putnam, 1993).

One area of this discussion that cannot be ignored is institutions. Since the introduction of the concept of institutions social scientist has been intrigued with the functions of institutions (Greenwood et al, 2008; Rowlinson, 1997; Scott, 1995). According to Halsall et al (2014) one of the prominent researchers on institutions is the British scholar Anthony Giddens. In his work Giddens (1987, p. 61) has noted that:

“Institutions, or large scale societies, have structural properties in virtue of the continuity of the actions of their component members. But those members of society are only able to carry out their day to day activities in virtue of their capability of instantiating those structural properties.”

This analysis from Giddens (1987) asks the question – what does institutions mean in a complex society? To answer this question a definition on institutions is needed. North (1991, p. 97) has defined institutions as ‘the humanly devised constraints that structure political,

economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights).' As North's (1991) definition demonstrates institutions have a profound effect on how communities work in an everchanging globalised society. Having discussed the historical influences of communities the next section moves on to discuss the contemporary debates now facing communities in the United Kingdom.

3. Communities - Agenda Changing

There are different times in the past when communities have changed. These changes fall into two sociological areas: (1) Social Groups and; (2) Social and Economic Indicators. As it has been well noted by many sociologists these two areas have caused much political discourse. This was evident earlier in the paper when discussions focused on the Chicago School as a number of scholars in the school were fascinated with social groups. One of the most prominent features of the debates on UK communities has been in relation to ethnic minority groups. When examining the UK there have been different periods in the past where there has been a net inflow of migrants moving to the country (Krausz, 1971). Many ethnic minority groups, migrated to the UK, from areas such as Bangladeshi and Pakistani which contributed to a debate on communities in the UK. There have been many case studies (Platt, 2007; Moon and Atkinson, 1997; Robinson, 1986; Boal, 1978) in the past that have examined the social and economic challenges facing ethnic minority groups living in the UK. One of the most coherent issues that were established when examining ethnic minority communities living in UK is the debate on segregation. Jackson and Smith (1981, p. 10) have noted that:

“Ethnic residential segregation is an integral part of the class position of the minority groups concern. As people are born into predetermined social structures, their spatial differentiation follows a logical structure.”

Research carried out by Halsall (2013) noted that there seems to be a difference of opinion between several academics as to whether certain ethnic minority groups are becoming more or less segregated. This debate on segregation has brought a new focus on social policy, as Philips (2008, p. 181) has suggested that politicians and policy makers have become ‘anxious about ethnic minority segregation’ and ‘are particularly grounded in concerns about ‘exposure’ or ‘isolation’ as evidence by the ‘parallel lives’ debate and notions of ‘self-segregation.’ Hence, this worry from politicians and policy makers has fuelled a debate on multiculturalism. Kundnani (2002) has argued that there is a need for a revival of multiculturalism. The existence of multiculturalism within the context of UK was introduced in 1960s by Roy Jenkins, the then Home Secretary to accurately describe the increasing ethnic minority population. Parketh (2000, pp.2-3) who is a well respected scholar on multiculturalism has defined the concept as:

“...not about differences and identity *per se* but about those that are embedded in and sustained by culture; that is, a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organise their individual and collective lives.”

This then moves on to the next point, the debates surrounding social cohesion and community cohesion. Both concepts are interchangeable but the most common concept used in UK communities today is community cohesion (Cantle, 2008). Community cohesion as a concept was introduced after the civil disturbances in Burnley, Bradford and Oldham in 2001. The concept has been seen as the problem solver for segregated communities and as (Thomas, 2011, p. 14) states when community cohesion was introduced it ‘heralded a marked change in language, emphasis and stated policy priorities.’ However, there has been critical discussion by a number of scholars on the concept of community cohesion (Halsall, 2013; Jones, 2013;

Flint and Robinson, 2008; Robinson, 2005). The driving force behind community cohesion is the conceptual idea of social capital. Sullivan (2009, p. 221) has argued that:

“Social capital can be defined as a resource that is generated via regularised interactions between actors who have developed relationships with each other based upon shared values, and who can use this resource for the attainment of individual or collective benefits that would not otherwise have been (easily) obtainable. Social capital draws attention to the role of networks, shared values and norms of reciprocity lubricated through trust, in generating and maintaining social order.”

The concept of social capital is embedded within the term ‘Civil Society.’ Sullivan (2009, p. 231) has noted pointed out that civil society ‘has been interpreted for the purpose of prescribing social capital.’ Moreover, the main purpose of creating a civil society is laying the foundations of democratic society and having a strong relationship of multiculturalism, social capital and community cohesion (Powell, 2013). Previous and the current UK governments have tinkered with these concepts. The current coalition government has introduced a new concept, namely the ‘Big Society.’

In May 2010 the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats came together to form a coalition government. This was a historic moment in British politics. When the coalition was formed one of the central policy features was the introduction of the ‘Big Society.’ The Big Society’s key attributes are that:

“It emphasizes giving citizens and communities power and information so that they can come together and solve problems themselves. Families, networks, and neighbourhoods are presented as needing to be stronger in order to take more responsibility, as the route to achieving fairness and opportunity for all. Examples given of what this means include local groups running post offices, libraries, and transport services. The coalition government acknowledged that one of the motivations for attempting to create a culture of volunteerism was to save money by getting people to do things for nothing that otherwise would require paid workers” (Harris and White, 2013, p. 39).

Over recent years there has been much critical discussion on the impact that the big society has had on local communities (Byrne et al, 2014; Ishkhanian and Sreter, 2012). Overall, according to Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley (2014, p. 452-453) the big society aims to ‘empower’ and ‘make us responsible as individuals, communities and, ultimately, as a population, so that we might become actively involved in community control and self-management.’ Furthermore, Westwood (2011, p. 691) has noted that ‘It is a self-reinforcing web of individual and collective actions, playing firmly to Cameron’s desire for greater levels of individual autonomy and responsibility, and to his ideological desire for smaller government.’ This premise asks the question what type of impact has the Big Society had on local communities. As current media reports suggest the Big Society has barely made an impact on local communities. For example Allen (2014) reported that an estimated 2 million pounds of funding from central government and the Big Lottery has been awarded to ‘three big society projects that barely happened.’ This would seem to be a great pity as the concept of the Big Society is a good idea in principle and future plans must focus on more involvement with local government. The final section of this paper will provide some concluding discussions.

4. Conclusion

This paper has critically discussed the complexities, possibilities and potential of community and the impact it has on the discipline of sociology. At the start of the paper it was discovered that a number of famous sociologists have written on the sociology of community. A contemporary definition of community was proposed, it was argued that the subject of 'community studies' is barely utilised and terms 'Community' and 'Community Development' are more frequently used. The paper moved on to discuss the historical influences of community studies and as it was found that many famous sociologists, such as, Ferdinand Tönnies have written on the subject. One of the changing aspects of the subject of community was the work of the Chicago School of Sociology. The scholars of Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Roderick McKenzie and Louis Wirth had a profound effect on topic area and provided a new critique on urban communities in American cities, as Tonkiss (2005, p. 8) notes:

"The tension between anonymity and community in the city underpins the discussion.... Such a tension appears in early debates in urban sociology, most notably in the work of the Chicago School theorists in the 1920s and 1930s."

After exploring the development of urban communities it was found that the debates of social organisations and institutions play a crucial role in the function of communities. As it was noted by David Harvey (1973) there are a number of 'natural forces' that create 'territorial organisations,' such as, kinship and ethnic minority groups that live in a city. Institutions on the other hand have a major influence on how communities work in an everchanging world.

The final section of this paper critically explored the contemporary debates on communities from a UK perspective. A number of concepts were examined, namely multiculturalism, social capital, social cohesion, community cohesion and the big society. As it was discovered all the above concepts have had a profound effective on how contemporary communities work today to create an enduring civil society and as Manuel Castell (2008, p. 78) notes 'civil society is the cornerstone of democracy.'

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