IN THE CONTEXT OF MOBILITY, SOCIAL IDENTITY AND BELONGING, WHERE IS 'COMMUNITY' AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Abstract

The word 'community' is used in many diverse situations. It may be that we move into a geographical community, buy into a product community, are part of a shared interest community, participate in a work or student community, belong to a cultural or lifestyle community, or are perhaps put into a community by those around us. Whatever the situation, the word community comes with a range of assumptions. If we are interested in working alongside communities, it is essential that we take some time to reflect on the value of belonging to communities, and the location of longer-term communities in today's neo-liberal context. This is particularly relevant in Aotearoa New Zealand today within the currents of individualism, consumerism, globalisation and mobility.

Responsible involvement in community development, particularly in the provinces, requires ongoing engagement with the concept of community, including some of the underpinning values and beliefs that inform people's perceptions of community. It has been well argued that proactively building a sense of community increases participation and contributes to a sense of individual and social identity, along with a sense of belonging. However, if these communities do not have a firm foundation over time, what might be the impact on individual, community and societal wellbeing? This question is explored within the context of today's neo-liberal mobile society, with a particular reference to the social institution of schools, and residential-based communities. As a part of this, the use of place-based community consultations as a strategy for community participation is critiqued.

Introduction

An individual sense of belonging and a clear sense of individual and social identity have often been linked to the concept of 'community', with the belief that healthy communities contribute to individual wellbeing, and vice versa (Chile, 2007a). This paper begins by exploring the dynamic relationship between identity, belonging and community. It then explores the value of community, and includes some of the underlying beliefs and principles that underpin community development frameworks when engaging with communities. Community within today's neo-liberal context is discussed, with a particular focus on the impact that mobility may be having on traditional communities based around residential locations and social institutions, such as schools and workplaces. The philosophical positioning of common community development principles is used to guide this discussion, and highlights some challenges to those using a community development framework of practice, particularly in relation to the community consultation process and to the practice of proactively building what may well be short-term communities. The place-based communities of schools and geographical locations are used to illustrate these challenges. Lastly the foci of community in Aotearoa New Zealand today are examined, with a reminder to those using a community development framework of practice, particularly in provincial and rural areas, about the significance of informal, organic, longer-term communities in relation to individual, community and societal wellbeing.

Social Identity and Community

Human beings are inherently social animals (Bruhn, 2005). From birth through to death we live alongside each other and depend on others for our very survival. Even more than this, our relationships with others significantly contribute to our sense of who we are as individual people (Chile, 2007b; Rutherford, 2007). As social beings we compare and contrast, looking for similarities and differences; from these we develop a sense of identity, place and belonging. Even those who claim to be loners, and who profess that their self-identity is inherently linked to being alone, use a process of compare and contrast in order to locate the title of 'loner', and can be seen as belonging to a community of loners. Having a sense of being connected to something bigger than ourselves can contribute to our sense of belonging, which in turn can affirm our self-identity and enhance our sense of wellbeing.

Social identity theory clearly links acceptance within meaningful social groupings and communities with self-perception and self-esteem (Fagan, 2010; Sengupta et al., 2013). A degree of mutual interdependence amongst community members contributes to a sense of obligation, responsibility, reciprocity and trust (Bruhn, 2005). Being practically and emotionally invested in the wellbeing of others can contribute to a community-based safety net, and enhances the likelihood of companionship, protection, support and encouragement from community members (Bruhn, 2005; Chadwick, 2008). Having an authentic sense of belonging to a community involves the process of building a shared history over time, along with some common understanding of that history, and contributes to the sense of the familiar and of belonging. It is having a sense of positioning within community that enables people to relax into acquired roles, and to be supported in those roles, which in turn can affirm identity. Group membership is where people learn about roles and responsibilities, and where they develop some kind of commitment to the wellbeing of that group or community (Chadwick, 2008).

Image One: Where is community and why does it matter? Social work in action Karen M. Fagan

Community development as a framework of practice is influenced by the belief that "The ability to participate in a society or community is essentially linked to a feeling of belonging to that group." (Chadwick, 2008, p. 5). It is through a sense of belonging to a community that people are then motivated to participate in social action, as the wellbeing of the individual becomes inherently linked to the wellbeing of the group (Chadwick, 2008). As McKay (2014) notes, "We rely on communities to support and sustain us, and if those communities are to survive and prosper, we must engage with them and nurture them. That's the beautiful symmetry of human society: we need communities and they need us." (p. 1).

Mobility and Belonging

Some communities provide a lifelong and inter-generational location for belonging. Ethnicity-based communities are an example of this, and it has been well researched that a positive ethnicity-based identity is central to the wellbeing of indigenous communities worldwide, including Māori and Pasifika people (Berk, 2005; Durie, 2005; McLennan, Ryan & Spoonley, 2010; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedder, 2001). However, there are many other identified communities in which people assert a sense of identity and belonging that, in reality, have proved to be more transient. Aotearoa New Zealand, like many other countries, has been profoundly influenced by the neo-liberal powers, be they political, corporate or both, that underpin capitalism and consumerism.

In the past, places like work, school and residential communities have been central locations where people have had an ongoing (and often lifelong) sense of identity and belonging. While this is still the case for many, in today's society a significant proportion of people in Aotearoa New Zealand have changed jobs, changed schools and shifted residential locations, and it is not uncommon for this to have happened a number of times. Today it is not unusual for family members to be living in different parts of the country, or in different countries, and for people to spend the majority of their day-to-day lives in communities with which they may well have had a short-term relationship. For exam-

ple, according to Statistics New Zealand, about one in five New Zealand citizens live overseas (as cited in Stuart & Ward, 2011), about one in four New Zealand residents were born overseas (as cited in Stuart & Ward, 2011), and almost sixty percent of New Zealand residents move once every five years (Bull & Gilbert, 2007). The 'Growing up in New Zealand' project (Morton et al., 2014) involved researchers interviewing over five thousand families of young children about a broad range of issues, including how often they shifted their place of residence. Of those interviewed, eighty percent had moved at least once in the past five years, and of those, seventy-four percent had moved twice or more (Morton et al, 2014). While moving house is quite common amongst many western communities, Morton et al.'s 2014 research identified a higher rate of shifting house amongst Aotearoa New Zealand residents than those in the United States of America, Australia, Great Britain, Sweden and Ireland.

Population mobility is reflected within school communities. School principals Bull and Gilbert (2007), whose research included twenty Aotearoa schools, revealed that almost a third or more of the students turned over in non-standard times during the school year, meaning that, along with the usual times when students changed schools such as graduation from primary school to intermediate, or from intermediate to high school, one in three students changed schools during the school term. From a local context point of view, Bull and Gilbert noted that this was significantly higher (at times almost three times higher) than the turnover rate identified in some studies from the UK (2007). From their findings Bull and Gilbert went on to question the appropriateness of what they called a 'schoolcentric' approach to belonging, in which schools actively attempted to build a sense of family or school community. They commented that "when analysing the interviews, we were struck by the number of times we were told by principals and teachers that they think of schools as being like families… Some schools use the term 'whānau' to describe groupings within the school, others referred directly to 'the school family' " (2007, p.82). Bull and Gilbert identified that high levels of mobility are

a fact of life in New Zealand (2007), and suggested that a twenty-first century approach to schooling could involve home-school partnerships that supported students' learning if and when they changed schools.

One challenge for those involved in community development relates to Aotearoa New Zealand's current school-based curriculum that includes proactively building a sense of an identity within, and belonging to, a community within the school context (Ministry of Education, 2007). While yes, the notion of participation and inclusion within the school community can contribute to a responsive, meaningful, relevant, and engaged school environment, it could also be argued that for many people schools are actually short-term communities, suggesting a much lower level of longer-term connection. Teachers and students come and go. Proactively using the school environment as a significant community context for young peoples' identity development and sense of belonging could arguably have a detrimental effect. The reality is that young people are a part of this community only until they leave school. To use symbols and rituals, like songs, uniforms and other community bonding activities in order to encourage a sense of belonging and identity begs the question – what happens when people leave this school community? While some relationships and shared memories no doubt continue beyond school, the school-based community as experienced by the young person no longer exists. Thus the school community they were once a part of is no longer available as an ongoing location of support, belonging, or as a safety net.

It is worth noting that for many people the departure from a school community may not be a decision that they have made, but rather one determined by other factors, such as family decisions to move, or by the process of age and stage (Bull & Gilbert, 2007). From a wellbeing perspective, is there an ethical question attached to proactively enhancing a sense of belonging and identity within a community which has such a definitive ending? If the school community is significant as a place of belonging, what replaces this? Since developing a sense of identity and belonging to a community takes

time, what clearly identifiable and accessible process have we put in place as a society to sustain young adults during this transition? If having a sense of belonging to a school community is such a significant component of young people's everyday lives, it may be that departure from this school community can leave a noticeable gap for many.

MOBILITY AND COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

Shifting between communities, be they work, school, residential, or nation state communities, impacts on the level and depth of shared understandings people have within communities. A sense of belonging is built on a foundation of familiarity, of common experiences, and on a sense of reciprocity (Chadwick, 2008). From the point of view of an individual, it is not easy to have a sense of responsibility and commitment to the wellbeing of community members if one is unfamiliar with that community. Moving into a community means reconfiguring one's own position, not only from a personal point of view, but also from the viewpoint of the community into which one is moving. As Lawler (cited in Taylor, 2010) has observed, "identities are socially produced, and there is no aspect of identity that lies outside social relations" (p. 3). Hence, a high rate of mobility into and out of a community can lead to communities "in which it is difficult to identify who belongs and who is an outsider. What is it we belong to in this locality? What is it that each of us calls home and, when we think back and remember how we arrived here, what stories do we share?" (Bauman, 2011, p. 430). Being included into a community is a dynamic process and takes more than just a willingness or an invitation. Having an authentic identity linked to a community requires time in order to explore commonalities. This requires some testing out, redefining, and the building of trust through shared experiences as a pathway for moving from outside to an inside position within a community (Bruhn, 2005).

Moving between social institutions (like schools and workplaces) and residential locations (across towns, cities and countries) is by no means a new phenomenon, although the extent of this mobility is more significant today.

It has been proposed that neo-liberal economic influences have significantly contributed to this, and as an outcome "the web of social and institutional relations that held people together have been fragmented" (Rutherford, 2007, p. 12). Shared histories and narratives that contribute to a sense of commonality have been disrupted, and as such traditional community-based obligations and responsibilities have been impacted. Saville-Smith and James (2003) comment that "high levels of residential mobility and transience confront local communities with real problems of community attachment" (p. 2). Rutherford (2007) suggests that after thirty years of the "neo-liberal economic order, we are a society that is beset by loss, loss of belonging…. Companies are re-engineered, institutions reconfigured, departments reorganised…goals, visions and mission statements are invented and redefined…we are living in a social recession" (p. 8). These are strong sentiments which provide a real challenge to those of us who believe that healthy communities are fundamental to an individual's sense of identity and belonging, and to societal wellbeing.

Goulet (1992) used the concept of anomie developed by Emile Durkheim (one of the founders of sociology) in order to further make sense of the impact that today's neo-liberal influences have had on society as a whole. Durkheim has been attributed with suggesting that "rapid social change creates a vacuum in norms…called anomie, where the old cultural rules no longer apply. When things change quickly…people become disorientated and experience anomie as they search for new guidelines to govern their lives" (as cited in Newman, 2011, p. 218). It is not such a big leap from this point to link mobility and the fragmentation of the more traditional communities to at least some vacuum in social norms. Add to this a sense of individual disconnectedness, a level of social alienation, and an identifiable gap in social buffers that support and enable people to explore and develop their own sense of identity and belonging as they move between communities. Common outcomes may well be not only a sense of individual displacement, if only for a period of time while transitioning to new communities, but also a reduction in the individual's sense of

community-based obligation, responsibility and reciprocity. Goulet (1992) observed that:

In the past every person knew his or her place in life. Now, however, that place is neither fixed once and for all, nor is it defined for specific actors in society. Small, closely-knit communities…within which people knew their place, their role, and their assigned vocation in life, have yielded ground to large impersonal institutions (p. 471).

As the focus on individual consumerism has increased, there has been an increase in communities being built up around the acquisition of products. In this scenario the sense of belonging and identity is often attributed to owning, or at least knowing about and promoting, these products. In these communities people can become a member, regardless of their work status, school attendance, residential location, ethnicity, age, etc. In a way, the purchase of a product like a surfboard, a vintage car, or an online game, becomes the ticket to membership. Rutherford (2007) identified a challenge in this shift in focus when he wrote that the "problems created by the neo-liberal economic order and the ways in which it has entangled the individual in the economic activity of consumption confront us with the need to remake a common life" (p. 15). This invites some reflection when considering Mackay's (2014) assertion mentioned earlier on regarding "the beautiful symmetry of human life: we need communities and they need us" (p. 1). It is not so easy to equate consumer-based communities built around products with the notions of obligation, responsibility and reciprocity. Having said that, human beings are inherently social (Bruhn, 2005), so it may be that for many people the products become the vehicle around which a common life, and authentic community, is developed.

APPLYING A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

In the context of mobility, potential displacement and detachment, and consumerism, it seems easy to identify the vital role that applying a community development framework

of practice could (and does) have. Community development strategies enhance an individual's sense of belonging and identity within a community context, thus enhancing social connectedness and social cohesion. They also contribute to building mutual interdependence, inclusion, a sense of responsibility, reciprocity and trust, all of which contribute to a safer and more equitable society for all (Bruhn, 2005).

Community development comes from a fundamental belief that communities are their own experts in what they need in order to be a thriving place for all community members (Chambers, 1997; Ife, 2012; Toogood, 2015). This ethnographic approach to knowledge and wisdom promotes the notion that community members understand their own needs more than 'outsiders'. Working alongside communities, acknowledging and respecting wisdom from within, and including community members in decision-making processes as they self-determine, leads to a more equitable society in which human rights and social justice are more likely to prevail (Aimers & Walker, 2013; Ife, 2012). Goulet (1992) proposed that "development is essentially an ethical concern" (p. 169), and this belief is reflected in a community development framework of practice that draws on philosophical positions and principles of inclusiveness, participation, reciprocity, equity and empowerment.

Having said that, community is often talked about as though it is a cohesive whole, like a shoal of fish or a flock of sheep, moving as one clearly identifiable shape made up of many individual parts. The assumption here is that community members have a degree of homogeneity, in that they share something in common. When the word community is used in everyday language, it is often attached to the word that defines what is shared by the community members, for example, the Haumoana (a small town) community, the Horowhenua College community, the migrant community, the deaf community, and the cycling community. Using a community consultation process as part of a community development framework of practice often involves the assumption that even if community members do not all know each oth-

er, clearly identifiable community spokespeople may be found who not only have shared understandings and experiences with other members of their community, but also share an ethical position congruent with principles that underpin community development, such as inclusiveness and bottom-up participation (Ife, 2012). As such, there may well be an assumption that the spokesperson for the community will apply community development principles to guide their engagement with their community, and to thus enhance authentic representation.

The 2002 New Zealand Local Government Act requires local authorities to include a consultative process in order to identify community outcomes (McKinlay, 2006; Toogood, 2015). A community consultation process has often been used to achieve this, with the community being based on geographical boundaries reflecting the local authority concerned. It has been argued that much of this consultation process has occurred from a top-down framework, in that it is local authority and government staff who facilitate the consultation process with the respective communities (McKinlay, 2006). Much of this has occurred via public meetings or via gathering information by targeting identified community leaders. Having highlighted the rate of mobility in place-based communities, this raises a question about who gets to speak on behalf of the community and whose voices are not included. Not only does it take a certain level of confidence for individuals to speak in public, but also, it is not always easy to identify a system of accountability to ensure that those who do speak out are approved community representatives committed to community development principles like diversity, inclusion and bottom-up participation. It could be argued that those who are new to communities, who are still building relationships along with shared understandings and shared histories, and who have not yet gained a clear role within the community, are just overlooked. This acts as a reminder that within community consultation processes like public meetings and interviewing, consultation with identified community leaders could be more realistically viewed as consultation with the more established community members, or perhaps viewed

as consultation with the more 'vocal locals' who are able to present their views in this format. Using a range of other strategies alongside public meetings and targeting community leaders may "ensure that participation in decision-making is democratic and inclusive, enabling people to contribute as equal citizens" (Gilchrist, 2009, p. 4), which is another underlying principle of community development (Gilchrist, 2009).

WHERE IS 'COMMUNITY' – AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

So, to return to the primary question: in the context of mobility, social identity, and belonging, where is 'community' – and why does it matter? If those involved in community development remain primarily focused on residential locations and social institutions (like school and work) in order to engage with community, who are they leaving out? Evidence suggests that there are a significant number of people in Aotearoa New Zealand moving between geographically located communities (Bull & Gilbert, 2007; Morton et al, 2014). It is argued here that there are some ethical considerations relating to using a community development framework of practice in order to build a deeper sense of identity and belonging within communities that, in reality for many, do not actually provide continuity over time (like the school community). While ethnicity and religious/spirituality-based communities are well recognised as providing a lifelong sense of identity and belonging (by birth and/or by choice), many people in Aotearoa New Zealand do not strongly identify with these as being formative communities for them. It has been well argued that people often belong to multiple communities (Gilchrist, 2009). Placing less emphasis on social institutions and residential locations as being primary communities of significance regarding identity and belonging, and more emphasis on communities in which people have more choice and longer-term involvement, may actually enhance individual, community and societal wellbeing.

In Aotearoa New Zealand there are times when a sense of nation state 'imagined community'

(Anderson, 2006) is identifiable; for example, on ANZAC Day when large numbers of people attend dawn parades and share a sense of a common history. A nation state community is also visible at some sports events such as when the nationally representative men's rugby team, the All Blacks, play another nation, or when national heroes like Sir Edmund Hillary or Dame Whina Cooper are commemorated, or when we discuss our national flag. It can also be seen when we, as part of the Pacific community, identify a commonality within the global arena. However, proactively building a sense of a collective nation state as a formative community for all citizens is arguably not consistently evident in Aotearoa New Zealand today. Perhaps, as we celebrate diversity, the notion of identifying commonality across all peoples has been confused with the oppressive notion of assimilation where the dominant is assumed to be the 'common'.

When considering individual and social identity and a sense of belonging, it may be worth increasing the focus on the organic, and the wide range of grassroots communities where people today can, and do, have some ongoing involvement and commitment (Chile & Black, 2015), and thus a sense of obligation, responsibility and reciprocity over time. More informal communities built around shared experiences (like parenting, or being part of an Ironman team), or shared interests (like local history or music) or shared lifestyles (like organic farming or retirement), or shared activities (like sport, art and craft, or online gaming), or shared beliefs (like social justice, equity, sustainability or fair trade) provide plenty of scope for community development. These locations may well provide the longer-term communities in which factors like reciprocity and community-based safety nets are consistent over time within today's neo-liberal, mobile context. After all, at least these communities tend to provide a location for identity and a sense of belonging to which one can remain, until (and if) one chooses to leave. And, as some commentators have suggested, communities are about relationships (Gilchrist, 2009) and "what people do for each other, not where they live" (Bruhn, 2005, p. 27), or work, or are educated.

Conclusion

This paper explores the contribution that community makes to the process of building a sense of identity and belonging in the day-to-day life of everyday people. It discusses the role that communities can have in providing a safety net for people, and acknowledges the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between individual, community and societal wellbeing. The concept and value of community is discussed, and some of the beliefs and principles that underpin community development as a framework of practice, generally speaking, are identified. There is some reflection around community within today's neo-liberal context, with a particular focus on the impact that mobility may be having on traditional communities based around residential locations and social institutions. Those involved in community development are invited to consider potential ethical ramifications of proactively building a sense of formative belonging and identity within short-term communities. The school community (as a social institution) and residential-based communities are used to further explore these issues.

In the context of mobility, the use of community consultation via public meetings and interviews with identified community leaders is critically examined. The use of these processes for engagement with community raises questions around authentic community representation, and the likelihood that many, more mobile people sit outside these processes. This paper asserts that common perceptions of community in today's society, particularly those that can be found in provincial and rural areas, could benefit from a considered shift in focus. The paper invites readers to reflect on the place of more informal, organic and grassroots communities for affirming a sense of identity and belonging. Threaded throughout this paper is the assumption that authentic healthy communities significantly contribute to individual, community and societal wellbeing.

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