Vocabularies of community

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Abstract   There have been many calls to conceptualize or reconceptualize key concepts that have been affected by the changes to ways of living, especially for young people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Community is one such concept. The ethnographic study reported here explored how educated young people involved in civil society online and with links to Sydney, NSW, expressed their understanding of community through their lived experience. It sought to theorize 'community' following Geertz and developed a vocabulary through which the human behaviour of community can be expressed. This vocabulary has some similarities to a vocabulary derived from the literature, but also differs in significant ways. An analysis of the vocabulary derived from the expression of the lived experience of the young people in this study indicates that community continues to exist for these young people and among other things that the desire for community is intrinsically linked to the development of self-identity and to making the world a good place to live. Community is not seen as an entity into which an individual can be absorbed, but rather something which grows out from the individual and which is endlessly created and re-created.

Introduction

There have been many calls to conceptualize or reconceptualize key concepts which have been affected by the changes to ways of living, especially for young people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Community is one such concept. Changes in realities and perceptions of time, space and place have renewed interest in the ways people interact. The increasing acceptance that in their everyday lives, people confront uncertainty and fragmentation has affected understandings of collectivity.

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Kenny has argued that understanding key terms such as community is 'critical' to the practice of community development (1994, p. 8). The purpose of this paper is to theorize community by documenting the vocabulary that a group of young people use to discuss it. If the vocabulary traditionally associated with community no longer effectively represents lived experience, this finding has the potential to raise questions about current perspectives in community development and to broaden dialogue between scholars and practitioners (Brennan and Brown, 2008).

There is no assumption in this study that there was ever a single interpretation of the concept of community. An analysis of the ways in which some of the earliest writers in sociology expressed this concept shows that not only was there no single interpretation of it but that community has always been a surrogate for other concepts and other concepts surrogate for it. For Durkheim, 'solidarity', a set of social relations, was at the heart of community and he developed the notion of 'collective consciousness' that carries with it overtones of shared morals and values, an idea also expressed as an essential part of community by Weber and Tönnies. For Weber, at the heart of community were the notions of belonging and of a course of social action.

Contemporary writers have identified other surrogates. Bauman substituted identity. Castells used the phrase 'network society'. Wittel called for networked sociality. Albrow and Eade argued for a clustering with milieu and culture, where the presence of one could be taken as a referent for the other two, rather than for a surrogate. They noted that loss of place was significant to shifts in meaning for each of the concepts, an idea popularized by Rheingold (1994) through his use of the phrase 'virtual community'.

Community can also be interpreted through other 'terms that surround it' (Taylor, 2003, p. 2). Associational forms of community can be seen to be related to the notion of civil society in the way Putnam describes (e.g. Putnam, 2000) and linked to social capital. Civil society in turn is linked to Habermas's notion of the public sphere and this in turn throws into relief the importance of communication. This communication does not have to take place face-to-face, according to Rheingold (1994, 2000), but can be mediated through information and communication technologies, a notion that was one of the driving forces behind the research reported here. Durkheim's emphasis on solidarity has led to the centrality of social relations for scholars such as Granovetter and Giddens. As noted earlier, Weber uses the concept of social action, which Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2003) link to civic engagement. Giddens links social action to the creation of self-identity because decisions about identity are ones that influence the kind of world one can inhabit and the way one can live in it (1991, p. 215).

The overview of the literature set out above shows that a vocabulary of 'community and the terms that surround it' exists. The main terms in this vocabulary include: Agency, Belonging, Collective, Communicating, Community, Civil society, Identity, Information and communication technologies, Morality and moral principles, Organizations, Place, Public sphere, Social action, Social capital and Social relations. If this vocabulary is not adequate to document community in the lived experiences of a group of young people, it may indicate a reconceptualization of community. Thus, the question prompting this research study is: What kind of vocabulary do young people use to express their understanding and lived experiences of community, including online?

Method

This study investigated the lived experiences of twenty-four young people as they explored how they created and maintained a sense of community. It was a case study using an ethnographic approach, informed by the work of Denzin (1989) and Geertz (1993), and emphasizing the organic nature of the process of creating community. Its theoretical concerns with the development of a vocabulary followed Geertz. The participants were selected using a snowball technique with criteria including being active in civil society and linked through communication technologies such as e-mail, online forums and social networking sites where they share information and experience with others, formally and informally. They were born in the 1970s and 1980s, and had lived in Sydney for some part of their young adulthood. Of the twenty-four participants, fifteen were male and nine female, sixteen were working full time and eight were full time students. They had studied a variety of undergraduate degrees, including arts, commerce, computing science, media studies, philosophy, politics and sociology and several had completed postgraduate studies. Although data on ethnicity or culture were not collected, physical or social characteristics would indicate that eleven of the twenty-four were not of Anglo-Celtic origin. Twenty-three participants considered themselves Australian.

They were interviewed at a time and location of their choice. The interviews were based on two open-ended question sets, the first relating to what it meant to be part of a community, including online, and the second relating to actions in civil society; they were recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions sent to the participants to be checked. Where participants indicated that they were active in public online forums or websites, data related to their interactions in these forums were also gathered. Data collection was carried out in accordance with the University of Technology, Sydney Human Research Ethics Guidelines. The

transcripts and posts in online forums were analysed through the NVivo software (QSR, 2006).

The development of a vocabulary for 'community' was, then, the focus of this study. An initial attempt to establish this vocabulary was made by creating a concordance of the actual words used by participants through the word frequency function of NVivo. However, controlling for word form and for synonyms became an unwieldy task. Thus, a broader approach was taken, identifying propositional uses of language (Laver and Hutcheson, 1972) and matching them using a constant comparison technique. Through this process, a complex pattern emerged, where terms were related to other terms through contexts of use and at the same time related to other terms through cross-cutting sub-themes. Each of the terms included has been used by at least one of the participants, but in the context of this vocabulary, it is to be taken as a common label for significant ideas expressed in different ways by participants. An idea was judged significant both by the number of participants expressing the ideas and the number of times each idea was expressed.

This vocabulary reflects the expressions of those who participated in the study and is limited by their experiences, characteristics and perceptions. There is no claim that these terms would be used by other people of the same age. These participants do not represent all people born in the 1970s and 1980s, nor even those who have lived in Sydney for some part of their young adulthood. Among the key characteristics that mark them out are their level of education and their active engagement in civil society, which was one of the criteria for involvement in the study. They have all volunteered on social change projects, from involvement with INGOs such as Oxfam and Amnesty International to local projects such as rehabilitation of areas of environmental sensitivity to online involvement as moderators for discussion forums. Some have initiated projects or established organizations and others have chosen to work in organizations facilitating positive social change.

The vocabulary of community in thought and experience

Comparing vocabularies

The terms in the participants' vocabulary for discussing community and the terms used by the researcher are presented in Table 1. This lists words common to both vocabularies as well as words which are particular to one vocabulary or the other. The researcher's vocabulary and the shared vocabulary are based on terms that emerged from the literature and which are commonly used in scholarly discourse. With the exception of

Table 1. Vocabularies of community

Themes	From the researcher	Shared vocabulary	From the participants
Community	Collective Place	Belonging Community	Dialogue Sharing knowledge and experience
	Communicating	Embodied People	Sustaining conversation
Civil Society	Trust	Civil Society Social Capital Public sphere	Public and private
Social Relations	Trust	Information and communication technologies Organizations Social relations	Choice Friends Keeping in touch Maintaining norms and standards Techniques for creating community Limiting or damaging community
Social action	Agency	Identity Social action Morals and morality	Reasons for social action Self Anonymity
Identity		Social relations Belonging Community	Authenticity Credibility Choice Learning Public and private

'embodied people', which paraphrases terms used by participants, all terms in the shared list are used by at least one participant.

An alphabetical list could suggest that these young people have a haphazard vocabulary for discussing community, but that is not the case. There are themes that run through the lived experiences of community they report, although from time to time, terms related to one theme occur in another. These themes include community, civil society and social capital, social relations, social action and self-identity. The vocabulary will be presented through these themes.

The theme of community

The theme of community encompasses community itself, belonging, dialogue and sustaining conversation, sharing knowledge and experiences and embodied people.

A sense of community is formed when people keep in touch, and the interactions can take place face-to-face or they can be mediated by some

form of technology (Quan-Haase *et al.*, 2002; Wellman *et al.*, 1996; 2001; 2003; Surman and Reilly, 2003). Among the participants, only Therese 'had a very geographical notion of community . . . having come from a small rural community where community was very definitely "in this place".' A sense of connection to others is very much part of community (Lombardo, Zakus and Skinner, 2002, pp. 369–370). In Annette's words, 'It's about a sense of belonging, about being with people that you have some sense of familiarity with . . . a sense of recognition.'

According to James, it is not easy to develop a sense of community, 'that's hard work, it's active, you do not always see eye to eye, but it's those processes of negotiation that allow it to happen.' Discussion and dialogue are important in creating the sense of recognition. Nick explains that what 'Generation Y wants to do . . . [is] talk about issues, speak out, be involved in a dialogue.' Jonathan is dismissive of what he refers to as 'just conversation', that is dialogue which is not purposeful whereas James shows the importance of holding and sustaining conversation when he says: 'but it's not just the two of us, we aren't isolated from everything else we're doing. This conversation has reverberations.'

In spite of their differences over the importance of conversation, Jonathan and James consider online discussion spaces examples of the public sphere, a place for 'a rational, coherent argument' according to Alastair. Ben laments that he was not able to take part in a particular discussion '[because] I didn't have a vocabulary to speak back to them with.'

Most participants consider that the sharing knowledge and experience are an essential part of creating community. Aimé believes that the cognitive aspects of sharing information lead beyond learning and self-actualization to community because of the potential for vicarious experiences. He says, '[you can] increase your knowledge and general culture on what others were doing and how and what were the issues they were dealing with – something which has contributed to my growth. . . . I know people through online. . . . I feel that I am part of a human community.'

Katherine and Alastair feel embodied people are important for community. For Katherine, the cognitive aspects of sharing information by itself, as proposed by Levy (1997), is not enough to constitute community; she wants to know who she is communicating with as she explains in an analogy between a university noticeboard and an online discussion board 'And then you could say "Oh, it's that girl with the red hair I wonder what she does' rather than 'Oh, it's a piece of paper saying bed for sale"'. Alastair emphasizes the emotional aspect of community when he notes: 'For me, there's still a lot more warmth and a lot more humanity and really something a lot more rewarding about being involved in an offline community than an online one.'

The themes of civil society and the creation of social capital
The themes of civil society and social capital encompass the vocabulary: civil society, social capital, public and private.

Rachel asked 'Isn't everyone part of civil society?' as the alternative for her could only be 'uncivil society'. David G. related civil society to membership of associations or involvement in non government organizations, lamenting 'I'm not part of a formal organization, so I have trouble seeing how I'm part of civil society'. Participants relate it to something similar to Beck's notion of civil society arising from the process of individuals working together as active citizens (2001, p. 157) or to Giddens' notion of the 'good society', where civil society comprises the actions of emancipatory politics and lifestyle politics (1991, pp. 214–216). Alan, who is 'not a big fan of the word civil', says 'For me, to be civil is very close to being humane. It's more than how you treat people.' However, civil society is not a phrase recognized by all participants, as Isaac notes when he says 'I'm not really familiar with the term [civil society]...might define it as communities in real life.'

Social capital can be seen as private and public, as Aimé demonstrates. Having first explained the importance of sharing knowledge and understanding and taking public actions to make social change, he adds that another approach is also important: 'you go to a pub to "build social capital" with your colleagues...we felt like we needed to rely on each other and help each other to get through difficult times to adjust to the way of life and living [here] and so you go on Friday to a pub, Thursdays you go to soccer.'

The paradox between public and private has another manifestation. The boundaries between civil society as a place where social capital is created in public and the private space of the individual are becoming blurred, as Tristan explains when he says 'I know I can do things online, because I'm a number, so I will sign petitions online, forward e-mails, stuff like that ...I'd much rather sit [at home in my room] and write an informed argument than stand there with a placard' (cf Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2003; Wellman *et al.*, 2003).

The theme of social relations
The theme of social relations encapsulates friends, organizations, keeping in touch, information and communication technologies, maintaining norms and standards, techniques for creating community and the possibilities of limiting or damaging community.

It is easy to use 'belonging' as a surrogate for social relations and the sense of connection with the emotional comfort that the word evokes. It is the connectedness of friendship that seems most significant for

many participants. Jonathan explores the idea of how 'circles of friends can begin to shade into community', where the notion of 'mutual benefit . . . and shared values' might become something 'that they want to promote more broadly within society', such that friendship may also stand as the replacement for kinship and social duty where longstanding relationships no longer exist (Huntley, 2006, p. 28). Attempts to create togetherness online may be a way to overcome loneliness for those who have known a close-knit community of locality, as Therese explains. But for those in the study who have grown up in a world where family members are separated by continents and interact through communication technologies, the use of information technologies to maintain connections is a significant aspect of everyday life (Huntley, 2006, pp. 35–39). Tristan describes how his family is separated across three continents and 'we all have webcams'.

Whether one can establish friendships online is a moot point. Isaac says 'I don't think it's necessary [to have a physical meeting in order to be friends because] from intellectual and emotional bonding you might be able to make friends.' However, even Rachel who has made many friends online 'would not want to have only online friendships'.

Connections also exist with organizations. The participants in this study were aware of many ways to name interest-based groupings and recognized the different collective behaviours that might be expected in these group-ings, which can range from membership of an organization (Jonathan) or a 'community of practice' (Therese), to the exclusivity of a 'small world' (David T.) to the self-identifying 'tribe' (Annette). Jonathan acknowledges that 'multiple memberships' of community organizations appeal to differ-ent aspects of an individual's interests, emphasizing that these groupings are based on choice (Giddens, 1991, p. 6; Bauman, 2004, p. 91).

Most participants, like Anna J., acknowledge that a set of basic skills exists to establish social relations online (cf Salmon, 2000; Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2003) and are aware that inappropriate use of these skills can limit or damage community. Those like Isaac, Marianne and Robert who act as moderators in discussion forums insist on the importance of maintaining norms and standards as behaviour as fundamental to com-munity. More generally, participants emphasize the ability to communicate online, especially in writing, and to use the common courtesies of face-to-face interactions. For Ben, however, there is something elusive in some successful interactions online, which are: 'based on little winks and nudges . . . impossible for me to read clues'. He likens them to 'public sex and drug deals, where the kind of communication that people have when they establish illicit interactions with each other would probably be invis-ible to me, because I don't do those things.'

The theme of social action

The theme of social action encapsulates reasons for social action, and the creation of self and identity. It also has a moral dimension.

Social action, which exists as a phrase for the young people in this study, is more than the Weberian instrumental rational action of associations and organizations in civil society, following the agenda of an organization. All participants in the study have been active as volunteers – this was a requirement for participation in the study. However, their motivations for involvement are varied. Katherine volunteers because she is fulfilling a 'sense of responsibility', while Robert is 'there for the fun'. David G. gets a 'sense of satisfaction from being involved in things that [he] believe[s] in'. Brett wants to 'achieve social change'.

Social action is also linked to the creation of self-identity because decisions about identity are ones that influence the kind of world one can inhabit and the way one can live in it (Giddens, 1991, p. 215). Anna N. considers herself an 'activist' and needs to take part in public meetings, and Alastair is 'in activist mode most of the time' while Nick says he is as 'a reluctant wearer of the civil society badge'.

Being involved in social action encompasses a moral dimension and can be understood in everyday language as 'abiding by your principles and moral views' as Robert indicated (cf Beck, 2001, p. 159). For some participants, being involved usually meant acting under the auspices of an organization in civil society to make a change in the world they live in, exemplified by Jonathan who actively sought an organization offering 'something that I can commit to over a long period of time.' For others, being involved is more likely to reflect an engagement with the world they live in, in terms of contributing to a democratic society (Giddens, 2000), such as Tristan's signing of online petitions for GetUp. They take action with a sense of integrity, from an intellectual standpoint and with emotional engagement and these decisions are potentially an expression of the morality that leads to social action (Beck, 2001, p. 159).

The theme of identity

Identity is a sense of self and this is crucial to establishing social relations, creating a sense of belonging and a sense of community as is clear from the overlap in vocabulary used by the participants. It encompasses credibility, authenticity, anonymity, learning and moral principles, as well as the notion of public and private.

Individuals choose and develop their own identity, portraying their own sense of self (Giddens, 1991, p. 53; Hall, 1996). Isaac tries to 'do what I think is right'. Learning and personal growth are important to Aimé, who acknowledges the importance of joining different networks to gain new

perspectives and also of following up opportunities through his job in a social change organization 'because you want also to grow through your work'. Creating their own credibility is important to participants in this study. Alastair thinks that having one's own website 'does tend to give you a bit of credibility ... [and] people will tend to take what you have to say a little bit more seriously.' For Sunil, authenticity emerges from the efforts to express oneself with integrity, as he explains when he describes how using online discussion forums he 'can meet and engage with people with similar interests and viewpoints ... rather than being forced by the limits of current media ownership to particular opinion or paradigms.'

Anonymity can protect one's identity. On the positive side, it can provide a sheltered environment for expressing an opinion. Jonathan 'know[s] that friends who are in the public service have blogs for their alter egos'. Adopting a pseudonym might prevent you from 'sounding like a complete wanker' as you search for ways to express an idea, as Alastair put it. Some of the younger participants, who are still developing their sense of self, take the opportunity of using a pseudonym to explore through the internet questions and issues that they cannot easily confront offline (Turkle, 1996). Alan does not want to be held accountable as an adult for actions and beliefs he may only be experimenting with and so in some discussion forums 'I very rarely use my own name' (cf Boyd, 2008). Not knowing who is part of the online discussion community is a two-edged sword for some. Angela says that 'a lot of people ... are more amenable to communicating with someone in a virtual space' but at the same time 'I'm very careful about what information I put out there ... about myself'. For Jonathan, anonymity can lead to 'deception'.

However, Isaac acknowledges that he does not need to know who people are to establish a sense of connection. 'With such close conversation over such a long period of time, you get to know their real personalities.' Establishing that sense of connection with someone unknown, except through an avatar, does not raise concerns for him, it is an accepted part of the interactions in the discussion forums he takes part in. Similarly, Marianne's experience with an anonymous discussion forum allows her to acknowledge that it is not essential for people to know each other face to face for that trust to exist. She says that 'it's one of the few places where [young people] can be themselves.' Sustaining a sense of connection requires trust (Giddens, 1990, pp. 87–88), although trust is not a word used by these young people.

Words that go missing
From the vocabulary of the participants in this study, there are also 'words that go missing' (Taylor, 2003, pp. 62–63). For Taylor, these words relate to

the 'darker side of community', power, and conflict. Missing from this common language are words acknowledged by only a small number of participants – exclusion and coercion, for example. Only Sunil refers to a sense of being 'ignore[d], . . . labelled "of ethnic appearance" or more insidiously "of middle-eastern appearance"', while Jonathan notes that community 'can be coercive or exclusive'. Robert identifies hegemonic power in online communities, where 'the majority or whoever is in power sets the trends [and] the rules do enforce a certain point of view'. Brett notes that '[conflict] can collectivize us because we have a common enemy'.

Discussion

There is considerable overlap in the vocabulary in the researcher's list and in the participants' list and this is not entirely unexpected, given the familiarity with the literature that most of the participants showed. This is worthy of comment as this characteristic may not be found even in educated participants in other studies. For some participants, it had been important to ensure that a social change project they volunteered on was theoretically informed and thus, referring to what they had read had become part of their repertoire. Others were still students and it seemed that referring to scholarly knowledge was part of their way of understanding ideas. A small group were voracious readers. To take two examples, although the phrase 'civil society' was introduced by the researcher, it was used independently by many of the participants; on the other hand, the phrase 'social capital' was introduced by participants.

   There are some terms on the participants' list that might have been subsumed in the researcher's list and others that have no parallel. Terms on the participants' list that may be subsumed in the researcher's list include: credibility, dialogue, friends, reasons for social action and maintaining norms and standards of behaviour. Credibility could be subsumed in social relations, but it appears that for the participants, these ideas are from two sides of the same coin and are fundamental to creating relationships with others. Dialogue could be taken as a fundamental part of the public sphere or it could be seen as a synonym for communicating; however, for the participants, dialogue contains the notions or a response from another person and the possibility of continuing communication. It seems to assume a greater level of interaction, and can refer to discussions on ephemeral or trivial topics as well as to those involved in negotiating complex agreements. Friends could be taken as an element of social relations. Yet, for the participants, friendship emerges as a necessary prerequisite to other social relations, a position traditionally held by family. Reasons for social action can be taken together with norms and standards

of behaviour. They can be subsumed in a number of terms – in particular, morality and moral principles. Doing the right thing is an important element of identity for the participants. They take action from this perspective and explain their reasons for engagement in this context. Integrity and authenticity are two words used by some participants to exemplify either their reasons for social action or the norms and standards of behaviour. Sharing knowledge is related to establishing dialogue; it is part of the reciprocity that underlies the development of ongoing social relations. In this sense, it is outward-focused. Sharing knowledge is also related to learning and development of self-identity, as noted below. In this sense, it is inward-focused.

Place is not included in this vocabulary. A few participants refer to websites and social networking sites as a meeting place. The familiarity with which they speak indicates that in some way this location exists for them when they are not online. However, most participants see themselves as mobile and consider that interactions centre around them.

Terms on the participants' list that seem to have no parallel in the researcher's list include: anonymity, learning, limiting or damaging community, keeping in touch, sharing knowledge, and techniques for creating community. The ideas of anonymity and embodiment appear significant in the interviews. However, the main reason for this would seem to be that the participants sought to respond to ideas and expectations that the researcher, as someone from an older generation, may have had about their interactions online. They do not use 'anonymity' to express fear of interacting with strangers and concern for their safety. Although interacting with strangers and constantly making new acquaintances is part of their everyday experiences, it is something that few chose to introduce into the interview. Learning and personal growth and development were significant for a number of participants. On the one hand, this can be explained because of their age and stage in life – university students and recent graduates. On the other hand, this could also be taken as an indication that they are engaged in the project of the reflexive self, constantly remaking themselves and changing what they know and how they can interact with others. The notion that skills and techniques needed for establishing links with others and creating community are important and that community can be limited or damaged through lack of skills or poor choice or use of technique makes these significant additions to the vocabulary.

One of the notable differences between the two lists is that the terms on the researcher's list are almost entirely nouns – labels for entities – whereas a number of the terms on the participants' list are gerunds – nouns ending in –ing that are derived from verbs – denoting action or process. Another

notable difference is that concepts such as community, civil society, social action and social capital can be shown to have two orientations, which can variously be labelled individual/collective, public/private, inward/outward and long-term/transient. These orientations coexist and even when they may appear to be contradictory, the resulting paradoxes are accepted by the participants in this study.

Conclusion

In summary, the young people who took part in this study have a vocabulary that they use to discuss notions of community, which brings together a range of ideas. What seems to anchor this vocabulary and minimize the fragmentation that could arise from the holding of contradictory orientations is the integrity of self, the importance of friends and the belief in the significance of moral principles that guide individual decision-making and action. Community begins with the individual. They create the impression that they are able to make decisions that affect their lives, rather than being subject to the will of others. The boundaries of community can be seen to stretch across time and space because it emanates from the individual and is supported by the use of information and communication technologies. It requires the 'lifejacket of friendship' (Bauman, 2004, p. 91), that is, the support of 'someone who protects the emotional well-being of the other' (Giddens, 1990, p. 119) and the bodily presence of others. Once these are in place, community can be built through the expression of ideas with anonymous others. The desire for community is intrinsically linked to the development of self-identity and to making the world a good place to live (Giddens, 1990, 1991).

This theorization of community is far removed from the notions of community reflected in the literature up to the late twentieth century. A vocabulary focusing on action or process should indicate a strong basis for encouraging participation in social change and transformative practices. The presence of co-existing or even contradictory orientations offers opportunities for working with multiple realities in processes that do not necessarily recognize external expertise and authority. A significant challenge for community development practice will be how to balance the expectations which flow from the strong individuality of a person who works towards their own view of better world to live in and that altruism which prompts volunteering and other social actions. Community is no longer to be seen as an entity into which an individual can be absorbed, but rather something that grows out from the individual and that is endlessly created and re-created.

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