The Handbook of Community Practice

Theories of Community

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The idea of community is evocative. It suggests both images and feelings of identity, belonging, shared circumstance, and common cause. Indeed, the search for community, fears about its demise, and renewed efforts to establish its viability in different guises (from the neighborhood to the church, from professional associations to Internet social networking sites, from ethnicity to gender to sexual orientation) have been ongoing, as have efforts to focus on community as a lever for social change (Chaskin, 1997; Sampson, 1999; Sites, Chaskin, & Parks, 2007; Wellman, 1979). Broad social movements—from labor unions to civil rights— have mobilized communities of interest sometimes widely disbursed geographically but tied by a common identity and circumstance. At the same time, as noted, there has been an enduring focus on *local* communities as a critical lever for change. Local communities (such as urban neighborhoods) are often the foundation for broader mobilization and advocacy efforts, but they are also a focus of change in themselves, often with a particular emphasis on addressing the needs and circumstances of disadvantaged populations.

But while "community" is in some ways ubiquitous—invoked by policymakers and people on the street, at different levels of social and economic status, from varied cultural backgrounds and across the political spectrum—it is also ambiguous, encompassing multiple meanings and valences, promoting conflict as well as cooperation, fostering solidarity, or masking division. This complexity is made more problematic by both enduring contestation and the dynamics of change. Community is fundamentally contested, both by theorists and on the ground—the former tending either to celebrate its virtues overly or to dismiss it as irrelevant or without utility (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2006), the latter based on competing claims-making among a range of actors (individuals, organizations, agents of the state) who for different purposes and with an eye toward different constituencies define, mobilize, represent, and act on behalf of "community" toward different social or political ends (Chaskin, 2003; DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2010). Community is also dynamic—in some sense a moving target—reshaped and needing to respond to significant macrostructural forces, from globalization and its attendant processes (including the increased mobility of capital, population, technology, and ideas) to shifts in policy regimes, economic opportunity, and institutional contexts (Sites et al., 2007). These dynamics are informed in particular by current global trends toward urbanization, economic liberalization, and shifting divisions of labor among state, market, and civil society actors and organizations.

Given both the ubiquity and ambiguity of ideas about community, then, how should we conceptualize it? What do various conceptualizations provide as a framework or foundation for social action and social change?

This chapter will explore theories of community and their relevance for community practice, broadly conceived. It will interrogate different ways of conceptualizing community (as a social, spatial, and political unit; in relation to people, institutions, and networks). It will explore different rationales behind its invocation (as context, target, and unit of action) as an organizing principle or point of departure for social action and social change. And it will examine community (as idea and reality) in the context of structural and historical forces that impact community thinking and action.

Conceptualizing Community

Theories of community have been a central concern of sociological inquiry from the discipline's beginning and have informed—implicitly or explicitly—community practice since its early stages, which are most often traced to the Settlement House Movement at the turn of the past century.[1] Fundamentally, such theories are concerned with the nature and foundation of interactions among individuals within social groups, and with the function, structure, and processes through which collective identity, norms, and the possibility of action are established and institutionalized.

The sociological concern with community began to be elaborated in the context of the sweeping social changes being brought about by the processes of urbanization and industrialization in the late 19th century and by the challenges that modernity was seen to present to social cohesion and collective endeavor. This set the stage for what Barry Wellman (1979) has called the "community question"—how the large-scale effects and social divisions created by these changes impact the organization and content of social relations. The distinctions between the *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) of Ferdinand Töennies (1887/1965) and between the mechanical and organic solidarity of Emile Durkheim (1893/1964), for example, explore a fundamental shift between "traditional" and modern social orders—the one characterized by primary ties, collective consciousness, and high levels of social integration; the other by more specialized relations, an increasingly elaborated division of labor, and a more complex, fractured, and differentiated social structure. These changes led, in the context of the industrialized city, to shifts in the nature of social organization that many early analysts lamented as a loss or decline of community. Louis Wirth (1938), in a highly influential extension of these ideas, claimed that urbanism in these contexts—characterized by increased population size, density, and heterogeneity—led to the weakening of connections among individuals, at the local level and in general, as mobility and the concentration of heterogeneous populations in urban centers increased. Urbanism, in this view, entailed "the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, and the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of the neighborhood, and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity" (p. 21).[2]

It was in this context of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and massive waves of emigration from Europe to the industrial cities of the United States that the early settlements were founded. Community practice as it emerged in these contexts responded to these circumstances and was informed by these notions about community in the modern world. Urbanization led to the differentiation of urban space into identifiable neighborhoods (Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, 1925), but it also led to social problems—isolation, disorganization, crime, and poor health—in industrial neighborhoods ("zones of transition," in Ernest Burgess's [1925/1982] terminology) that were characterized by poverty, demographic heterogeneity, and residential instability (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Wirth, 1938). Settlements were sited in these neighborhoods, and their approach to working with the people who lived there and to addressing the circumstances of poverty they experienced was based in part on a general conviction that these circumstances were generated—or at least exacerbated—by the ecological forces of the industrial city that militated against normative mechanisms of social control and integration. In Jane Addams's (1911/2002) words:

> The social relationships in a modern city are so hastily made and often so superficial that it is not to be wondered at that the old human restraints long sustained in smaller communities by public opinion should have broken down and that large areas of city life seem to be dominated by the more primitive instincts. (p. 201)

Theorizing about community, and early orientations to community practice, were thus

propelled by concerns about its loss in the context of rapid and dramatic societal changes. They also focused in some way on the relationship between connection and place. Although networks of connection that bind individuals to one another as a community may or may not be rooted in place, how such connections—informally inscribed in networks of relations or more formally embedded in such institutions as churches, social clubs, member organizations, and associations—might be grounded in space was central to early community practice, as it often is today. Neighborhoods are not seen simply as bounded units of space but as places where some set of social (as in kin, friend, and acquaintance networks), functional (as in the production, consumption, and transfer of goods and services), cultural (as in religion, tradition, or ethnic identity), or circumstantial (as in economic status or lifestyle) connections exist and might be built on to effect social change.

"Community" thus has multiple dimensions that are relevant in different ways for informing community practice by framing community as an organizing principle for targeting intervention or as a foundation for broader social action. In light of this, I suggest three "lenses" through which to view community: social, spatial, or political. Each "lens" emphasizes a particular dimension of community structure and process, within which different component actors and processes—individuals, organizations, networks—may be identified, active, and activated.

The Social Basis of Community: Interaction, Identity, and Function

Focusing on the social dimensions of community hinges on the relationships among individuals and their membership in a collectivity grounded to some extent in a common identity, shared norms, and concrete interactions and exchanges. These exchanges may be more or less tied to space and may be more or less grounded in intimate versus casual relations. Network orientations, for example, seek to liberate the question of community from the assumption that primary ties will be locally bounded or enacted on the basis of either ascribed or elected group membership (e.g., race, religion, institutional attachment), focusing instead on the "structures of relationships and flows of activities" (Wellman, 1979, p. 1203) that may provide a source of support, connection, and the grounds for collective endeavor—however they are organized across space or affiliations (Mitchell, 1969; Wellman, 1979, 1988). This is a particularly apposite orientation given the ways in which current circumstances (e.g., the separation of the workplace from the residential neighborhood, increasing residential mobility, and technological advances, particularly in the fields of communication and transportation) have "freed urbanites from traditional spatial constraints and expanded their range of social choices" (Lee, Oropesa, Metch, & Guest, 1984, p. 1163). Indeed, most relational ties in this context are no longer concentrated locally, though they continue to operate in important ways across space.

Two aspects of networks are particularly important to highlight with regard to the notion of community solidarity and functioning. One concerns the degree of network closure—the extent to which people know the people who know you. This is particularly important in supporting informal mechanisms of social support and social control (Coleman, 1988; Sampson, 2001). The second has to do with what are often called "weak ties" or "bridging" relationships—casual or instrumental rather than intimate bonds—that can connect individuals to networks of association held by others, through which individuals can gain access to information, resources, and opportunities beyond those provided by their own networks of close association (Granovetter, 1973, 1974; Putnam, 2000; Warren, 2001). To the extent that such networks can be leveraged for advantage, they contribute to "social capital;" individuals within the structure of such relations operating in a context of trust and reciprocity have the ability, by virtue of these connections, to achieve ends not otherwise possible

(Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988). In addition—and important for considering networks as an operating principle to inform community practice—networks can be engaged *strategically* to promote the advantage of individuals or collectivities (communities, organizations, firms) to the extent that they can position themselves to maximize nonredundant contacts and establish ways to broker relations and link actors across "structural holes" between networks (Burt, 1992).

Arguments about the benefits of social capital have been ascendant in recent years, perhaps most influentially promoted by Robert Putnam (1993, 2000), who emphasizes the central role of civic engagement in a broad range of associations—particularly social and civic associations—that he believes are essential engines of collective action and individual as well as societal well-being. However, these ideas have also met with important criticism. Treatments of social capital have, for example, been criticized for almost always assuming positive benefits for society—that is, suggesting that all civic engagements will lead to greater social capital that is ultimately beneficial for individuals, the community, and democracy more broadly (Portes, 1998). Instead, depending on context, social capital can have both positive and negative effects (Coleman, 1988; Foley & Edwards, 1997). An increase in social capital could potentially promote inequality (given its uneven distribution), constrain individual advancement (in light of membership obligations and "downward leveling norms" within groups), or lead to exclusionary practices (Portes, 1998; Portes & Landolt, 1996; Woolcock, 1998). Thus, not all civic engagement or community action—especially when it includes involvement in exclusionary associations—is beneficial to the broader community or to particular marginalized groups.[3]

Further, social capital looks different in different kinds of neighborhoods. Focusing on four different dimensions of resident-based neighborhood social capital (networks, collective efficacy, organizational involvement, and conduct norms) and leadership-based neighborhood social capital (positional contacts and organizational involvement), Sampson and Graif (2009) conducted a cluster analysis to construct a four-part typology of neighborhoods that reflect very different kinds of social organization. These range from neighborhoods characterized by "institutional alienation," in which resident collective efficacy (combining shared norms and a willingness to intervene) and organizational involvement are low but neighborhood leaders are highly engaged and connected, to those characterized as "urban villages," in which residents show high levels of collective efficacy, local networks, and organizational involvement, but leaders are poorly connected.[4]

Although thinking about community in terms of networks and social capital frees it from a priori assumptions about "groupness" within spatial or institutional boundaries, and although many relational ties are not locally determined or bounded, social dimensions of community continue to inhere and operate at the local level, and local communities remain an important social resource (Sampson, 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Indeed, ideas about social capital as deriving from and supportive of "community," grounded in networks of association characterized by trust and norms of reciprocity, often focus on their operation at the local level. These ideas have been highly influential in recent years, lying behind a broad range of efforts focused on "community building" and drawing on assumptions about the importance of neighborhood life, civic participation, and associational action (e.g., Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Kubisch et al., 1997; Putnam, 1993, 2000).

Still, there are different orientations to conceptualizing the social basis of the local

community.[5] Communitarian orientations are often grounded in notions of the local community as a modern transplant of the close-knit rural village or primordial "folk community" in which relations among individuals are based on primary ties of kinship and friendship and rooted in a common identity connected to local life, shared values, and social cohesion. In cities, this view sees the neighborhood as a kind of urban village, the model for which emerged out of the early work of Chicago School sociologists and their development of theories of urban ecology. Here, within the broader dynamics of city growth and change, the organization and development of neighborhoods as distinct subareas of the city grew (Burgess, 1925/1982; McKenzie, 1926/1982; Park, 1936/1982). The process of neighborhood differentiation was seen as an organic one in which an efficient and evolving social organization, driven by natural processes of selection, competition, invasion, and succession, produced distinct residential subsystems. A system of "natural areas" was formed by physical forces of industrial development and land use, as well as by the distinguishing forces of cultural attraction and identity and by the development and reproduction of locally based sentiments and symbols (Firey, 1945/1982; Park, 1936/1982; Zorbough, 1926/1982). A prototypical example was the ethnic enclave, formed by the clustering of immigrants into local communities around particular kinds of available work. Immigrant workers congregated within walking distance of the industry in which they tended to specialize and were further propelled to establish, in their neighborhoods, *community* based on ethnic solidarity and identification through the "social imperatives of their cultural systems" (Golab, 1982; Massey, 1985; Portes & Manning, 1986). Existing networks of early immigrants embraced new arrivals from home and offered a sense of identity, security, and belonging. The arrival of different ethnic groups and the development of coexisting sets of networks along these lines within the same geographic area often created some initial conflict until a new balance was established (Burgess, 1925/1982; Golab, 1982). The urban landscape seen to emerge from this growth was characterized by multiple, coexisting communities—a "mosaic of little social worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate," in Robert Park's (1952) famous words. It was based on this view, and the belief in the viability of maintaining and promoting community within distinct, naturally formed neighborhoods, that the earliest neighborhood organization movements began (Fisher, 1981; Melvin, 1987; Miller, 1981).

But one can think about the local community without emphasizing these affective ties as the basis for community solidarity and identification. Indeed, an overemphasis on identity and cohesion can lead to romanticizing the local community based on a misplaced notion of some past "golden age," suppressing the recognition and appreciation of difference, underemphasizing the inherent reality of conflict and division within communities, and eliding broader issues of structure and agency that shape community circumstances from both inside and out, through the decisions and actions of political and market actors (DeFilippis et al., 2006; Gottdiener & Feagin, 1988; Simmel, 1908/1971a; Suttles, 1972, 1990; Young, 1990).

Other orientations to the social dimensions of local community focus more on function than identity and affective connection, and see the neighborhood in terms of use and its position within a broader system of social units and collectivities. Here, community is a social system—the activity space in which goods and services are provided and consumed, interpersonal relationships are created and maintained, participation in activities is shared, and the circumstances of local life are held in common. It is, as Roland Warren (1978) puts it, "that combination of social units and systems" that provides "the organization of social activities to afford people daily local access to those broad areas of activity that are necessary in day-to-day living" (pp. 163–164).

The social functions of community thus conceived are critical, from the production,

distribution, and consumption of social and economic goods and services (e.g., educational, religious, and commercial activities), to the socialization of youth and maintenance of norms and social control (both informally through relational networks and formally through institutions such as schools and police), to social participation and mutual support through institutions, voluntary organizations, and kin and friendship networks (Warren, 1978). But they are not necessarily reliant on strong affective connections or high levels of commitment, or defined within clear and discrete boundaries. Local communities are connected by vertical links to broader systems as well as organized through horizontal links among members (Choldin, 1984; Moe, 1959; Warren, 1978). Attachment to community may be contingent, voluntary, and based on instrumental values tied to investment, function, and use as opposed to affective ties and interpersonal neighbor relations—a "community of limited liability" (Janowitz, 1967; Suttles, 1972) rather than an urban (or folk) village. Further, individuals attach different degrees of importance and are differently engaged in their local communities, and these relationships themselves may shift; as John Kasarda and Morris Janowitz (1974) suggest, "in a highly mobile society people may participate extensively in local institutions and develop community attachments yet be prepared to leave these communities if local conditions fail to satisfy their immediate needs or aspirations" (p. 329).[6] Membership in community is partial; individuals belong to a multitude of associations and relationships and are tied to a number of different—and differently defined—communities.

Emphasizing different orientations to the social dimension of community has implications for orientations toward community practice. Emphases on communities as affective units of belonging and identity, for example, assume particular kinds of interpersonal connections and shared values that can be relied on or built on toward social support, mutual aid, or collective action. They also tend to focus internally rather than on the influence of exogenous structures and processes, and on informal and voluntary bases for social action. Functionalist orientations toward community are more likely to understand the basis of potential solidarity and foundations for collective endeavor around questions of interest and instrumental values —assuming that community action is more likely to be organized around "the protection of status or family needs"—and more likely to act collectively to protect existing investments or advocate for change through formal channels (Guest & Lee, 1983, p. 223).

Community as Space and Place

Just as orientations to the social dimension of community often include the assumption of some spatial basis for connection, focusing on community as "space and place" assumes some level of social connection organized spatially. Although interpersonal ties extend beyond the local for most people and the local community may be a less central construct for the concentration of intimate ties or networks of sociability, it continues to provide a forum for relationships through which information, aid, services, and connection to broader networks and systems are shared, and to provide a foundation for the production and maintenance of shared values, social control, and social support (Fischer, 1991; Sampson, 1999; Wellman, 1979). However, the local community is defined and bounded in different ways, by different actors, for different purposes, according to different criteria. The local community is also used —and relied on—to different extents and in different ways according to circumstance.

Community boundaries are drawn both by individuals and organizational actors, both inside and beyond a community. Individuals define their local community as they interact with their immediate environment, constructing "cognitive maps" that guide their relationship to space, their choices of movement, and their approaches to social interaction (Downs & Stea, 1973;

Gould & White, 1974; Guest & Lee, 1983; Lynch, 1960; Suttles, 1972). The shaping of these cognitive maps is informed by a number of factors, including physical elements such as streets, bus routes, walkways, walls, viaducts, rivers, and landmarks. It is also informed by social and functional elements, such as demographics, the presence of major institutions, the relative location of amenities, and the perception of safety or danger that individuals have based on these (Anderson, 1990; Gould & White, 1974; Suttles, 1972). In addition, how individuals define their local community is determined by the degree of relative emphasis they place on its defining characteristics—for example, focusing more or less on its role as a place within which various *activities* occur, as the spatial organization of a set of *social* relationships, as connected to *institutional* location and membership, or as a *symbolic* unit with a name and recognized identity (Guest & Lee, 1983; Lee & Campbell, 1997).

The ways individuals perceive and construct the size and boundaries of their local community and the ways they *use* it and rely on it for their needs depend in part on their status in, and relationship to, the larger society. Those most integrated into the larger society (e.g., White people, people who are married or middle age, people with higher incomes and education) tend to have larger, more dispersed, and more casual social networks. People who are less integrated into the larger society (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities, singles, children and the elderly, people with lower incomes and less education) tend to have networks that are smaller, more intense, and more frequently engaged *within* the neighborhood (Campbell & Lee, 1992; Lee & Campbell, 1998; Lee, Campbell, & Miller, 1991). Regarding use, neighborhoods that are reasonably homogeneous, lower income, and have a high percentage of young people may be the most likely areas for concentrated local use, serving as both an important source of instrumental relational ties and a reliable hub for many goods and services (Ahlbrandt, 1984; Campbell & Lee, 1992; Lee et al., 1991), except when these resources simply do not exist or where there are particularly serious barriers—such as high levels of violent crime—to engaging them (Furstenberg, 1993).

Position in the life course also influences how individuals use and rely on their local community. Children are generally less mobile and more likely to concentrate activities within the neighborhood. The elderly may be equally constrained geographically but may be less likely to make use of neighborhood facilities and services because of more extreme limitations on physical mobility, fear of victimization, reliance on informal personal (especially family) networks, general diminution of social activity, or lack of available or desired services or facilities at the neighborhood level. Residents' involvement in organizational activities may also differ by neighborhood context and individual characteristics. Neighborhoods that are well defined (and recognized) as units, more homogeneous, and of higher socioeconomic status seem to be more inclined to address neighborhood issues through organized means such as community organizations (Guest & Oropesa, 1984). At the individual level, adults (particularly between the ages of 35 years and retirement) are more likely to belong to neighborhood organizations and voluntary associations, as are more affluent residents, married couples, and members of families with children (Ahlbrandt, 1984; Crenson, 1983).

Given that cognitive maps of the local community are developed by individuals in response to these various social and physical aspects of their environments and that their individual experiences in these environments (determined in part by their social status more broadly) will inform their perceptions, there is often only partial agreement about specific boundaries (Coulton, Korbin, Chan, & Su, 2001; Lee & Campbell, 1997). Some degree of consensus is built through social interaction, so some informal boundaries (the border between a neighborhood in transition and a perceived high-crime area, the declared boundaries of a gang's turf) may be acknowledged through informal sharing of information, perceptions, and

observations or through active (sometimes violent) campaigns of boundary maintenance (Anderson, 1990; Papachristos, Hureau, & Braga, 2010; Suttles, 1968).

Beyond the cognitive maps of individuals, community boundaries are also defined by a variety of corporate actors such as community-based organizations, real estate developers, bankers, service providers, and city planners. Such boundaries may serve to organize service delivery or provision, define a constituency, or provide a foundation for claims-making. Local organizations may define community boundaries for their own purposes of organizing their work and defining their identity, but boundaries are also drawn by external actors seeking to delineate new markets, manage the distribution of goods and services, or establish relationships with the community through local organizations. In some cases, establishing local organizations as representatives of a given neighborhood is fostered or stimulated by outside organizations (government, philanthropies, corporations) to organize particular interventions, to provide a source through which information can be channeled and received, or to provide a foundation for support or legitimacy (Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993; Chaskin, 2003; Taub, Surgeon, Lindholm, Otti, & Bridges, 1977). Defining community boundaries in this way is sometimes based on the adoption of any of a range of existing administrative boundaries—such as census tracts, zip codes, police districts, school catchment areas—and sometimes through a process of engagement with some set of community actors. Defining communities for particular initiatives or interventions, particularly when resources are at stake, is often a highly political (and sometimes contentious) process, entailing negotiation among (for example) funders, local organizations, city officials, and resident groups (Chaskin, 1998). The specific boundaries defined by these various groups rarely agree precisely with one another or with the perceptions of neighborhood residents, although there may be some consensus around the central blocks within a given community, with agreement falling off at the outer edges (Coulton et al., 2001; Taub, Taylor, & Dunham, 1982). There may also be reasonable agreement on the name of a neighborhood and the general area it comprises (Guest & Lee, 1983; Hunter, 1974).

The outcome these processes lead to is that of various, coexisting community definitions—multiple boundaries and nesting neighborhoods within a broader set of spatially organized social systems (Chaskin, 1997; Sampson, 1999; Suttles, 1972). To complicate this further, while some constructions of the local community may be fully subsumed within larger, more inclusive units, the boundaries of these nesting neighborhoods (for example, electoral wards, school district boundaries, community renewal planning districts, community-based organizations catchment areas) often overlap and cross-cut one another and may lead to competing claims of jurisdiction or responsibility. How one theorizes community as a spatial construct has implications for community practice both because of what different definitions include (and exclude) and because of the associated assumptions about membership, capacities, responsibilities, and processes inherent in such definitions. Defining community as a small, residential neighborhood, for example, emphasizes—implicitly or explicitly—informal social organization among neighbors and related assumptions about the basis of solidarity and cohesion, while defining community as a larger spatial area might include (and rely on) the local organizational infrastructure and assumptions of institutional engagement. Moving between levels of neighborhood definition may thus support different strategies and incorporate the resources and organizational possibilities at different scales of operation (Chaskin, 1998).

Community as a Political Unit

A third "lens" through which to view community, incorporating both social and spatial

dimensions, is as a political unit (with a small *p*)—a basis for representation, collective deliberation, mobilization, and action. Indeed, "interactional" perspectives on community emphasize the ways community *emerges* through specific instances of collective action, grounded in social interaction, around issues of common interest (Bridger, Brennan, & Luloff, 2011; Warren, 1978; Wilkinson, 1991), rather than assuming its existence based on propinquity or social structure. Thus, community exists when it acts and is defined in these instances by the range of actors (individuals, associations, organizations) and interactions collectively engaged toward some common purpose. These interests are often, though not always, grounded in locality.

There are at least two different (though related) orientations toward community considered as a political unit in this way. One focuses on issues of participation, deliberation, and governance and is based on ideas about local democracy and the roots of democratic action. Another focuses on community organizing and the potential to promote social change through political mobilization, activism, and contention.

The theoretical literature emphasizing participation as central to contemporary democratic practice emerged to counter what had become "orthodox doctrine" in democratic theory that emphasized the difficulty of enacting classical notions of democracy in complex, industrialized nation-states (Pateman, 1970). Pluralist frameworks minimized the importance of more direct forms of democratic participation, focusing instead on formal institutional arrangements that channel citizen preferences to elected officials through voting and interest groups that negotiate with and put pressure on officials on behalf of particular constituencies (Dahl, 1961; Pateman, 1970). However, the limits of core pluralist assumptions about the capacity of such mechanisms to govern effectively, legitimately, and without systematically or permanently excluding minority groups have been widely voiced (Judge, 1995). These critiques have led to the development of alternative orientations, including theoretical arguments regarding the benefits of (and possibilities for) more robust processes of participation and deliberation, promoting "strong democracy" against the weaknesses of the representative mechanisms and conflict- and interest-oriented assumptions that dominate liberal democratic regimes (e.g., Barber, 1984; Cohen & Rogers, 1995; Mansbridge, 1980). These arguments are particularly apposite in the context of disadvantaged and disenfranchised communities for which formal mechanisms of representation and provision and the differential influence of interest groups have been less responsive. As Clarence Stone (2009) suggests, "The *de jure* equality attached to citizenship notwithstanding, the *de facto* reality of socioeconomic inequality impinges on these extra-legal arrangements and related understandings" (p. 268).

At the local level, the rationale for participation often turns on a set of assumptions about the possibility for "neighborhood democracy," stemming both from a recognition that local communities have capacities and associational infrastructures—"unofficial arrangements for performing essentially political functions" (Crenson, 1983, p. 12)—and from arguments regarding the benefits of decentralization in response to the failures of centralized, fragmented, unresponsive, and unaccountable government action (Yates, 1974). Local communities, in this view, are seen as foundational political units, offering the "possibility of face-to-face interaction, which lies at the heart of the theory of participatory democracy" (Berry et al., 1993, p. 10; see also Barber, 1984).

Arguments for considering local communities as a foundation for political life and an organizing principle for the promotion of neighborhood democracy incorporate notions of local knowledge, local rights, and local power (Chaskin & Garg, 1997). An emphasis on local knowledge is based on the recognition that residents represent sources of information and

insight unavailable to outside professionals and that leveraging this knowledge can be essential for informing more responsive, workable, and sustainable policies (Fung, 2006; Sirianni, 2009). An emphasis on local rights is grounded in the basic assumption within democratic societies that individuals have a fundamental entitlement to a meaningful voice regarding issues that affect them (Barber, 1984; Young, 1990). An emphasis on local power and "empowerment" concerns both the assumption that local knowledge and rights will be channeled into deliberative and decision-making forums in meaningful ways and that participation in such forums will further build the capacity of community members to be active, effective citizens (Chaskin & Garg, 1997; Briggs, 2008; Pateman, 1970; Sirianni, 2009).

These orientations often result in efforts to organize local arrangements that promote community or neighborhood "governance"—institutionalized mechanisms that guide participation, deliberation, and decision making; represent community interests to actors beyond the community; and identify and organize accountability and responsibility for action undertaken (Chaskin, 2003; Fung, 2006). Grounded in expectations of community empowerment and self-determination, such mechanisms can provide an organizational foundation for community action, although they often entail (and may embody) fundamental tensions around questions of representation, legitimacy, accountability, and expectation. Communities are not monolithic; they include a range of interests, values, priorities, and expectations. Similarly, opportunities for and constraints on participation are not uniform, and some residents (homeowners, those with relatively more resources, longer-term residents) are more likely than others to engage in and be better represented by organizations (Berry et al., 1993; Chaskin, 2003; Crenson, 1983; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Even within forums that encourage diverse participation, differences in resources, education, experience, and networks of connection mean that participants often come to the table on less-than-equal terms (Briggs, 1998; Chaskin, 2005). Similarly, institutional interests often have outsized influence on deliberations concerning development, even when citizen review and input is formally structured and operative (Berry et al., 1993).

A second orientation to community as a political unit focuses on community mobilization more than governance and emphasizes the community as a foundation for activating collective claims-making, shifting power relations, and influencing the actions of powerful others—particularly the state but also corporate actors in the private sector such as banks, developers, and corporations. These actors impact community circumstances, and their decisions and actions may be central to meeting (or thwarting) neighborhood goals—but also, potentially, to broader questions of social justice (Shragge, 2003). In this view, it is through collective mobilization and contention—"political actions that challenge authority"—that communities "act" (Hunter & Staggenborg, 1986, p. 169; Tilly, 1973). Communities (of interest but also often of place) provide the basis for much social action today, providing a foundation for mobilization around not just economic and labor issues but social, cultural, lifestyle, and identity issues as well (Fisher, 2001).

Although the "classic" orientation toward community organizing is grounded in conflict theory, confrontation, and direct action (Alinsky, 1971; Fisher, 2001, p. 250), community efforts to engage and influence outside systems and actors can take a number of forms, be oriented around different strategic assumptions, and draw more or less effectively on resources, relationships, and opportunities available to community actors and allies. Some will be oriented more toward strategies involving mobilization, pressure, or protest; others will focus on leveraging key relationships with those in power in more private, informal, or collaborative ways. Many efforts will use some combination of these strategies, at different points of time, with different interlocutors, and around different issues—moving back and forth between

conflict and consensus approaches, direct action and informal negotiation, independent action and coproduction (Andrews & Edwards, 2004; Chaskin et al., 2001; Edwards & Foley, 2003; McCarthy & Castelli, 2002; Mosley, 2009). The "community" mobilized in these ways may also rely on different mechanisms, directly recruiting individual participation in a campaign around a particular issue, operating episodically through relatively informal organizational mechanisms (such as block clubs), drawing on institutional membership and capacity (such as through churches), or institutionalizing capacity for mobilization through multi-issue neighborhood organizations, often with support from a professional organizer on staff or provided by an organizing intermediary (Alinsky, 1971; Chaskin et al., 2001; Delgado, 1986; Fisher, 1994; Warren, 2001).

How one theorizes community as a political unit also has implications for community practice, focusing more or less internally on community capacity and self-determination versus externally on power structures and claims-making against state and market actors; privileging different organizational forms and strategic repertoires; relying on different assessments of how power, priorities, and interests align; embracing potentially different orientations to defining, recruiting, and engaging constituencies and allies; and assuming potentially different expectations for the nature, intensity, duration, and outcomes of participation.

Continuity and Change: Community and Community Practice in the 21st Century

The three "lenses" through which to view the multidimensional construct of community place different relative emphases on what community "supplies" (Sampson, 1999) as a basis for social solidarity and collective action. Different orientations to community practice are—and historically have been—based on different (tacit or acknowledged) assumptions about community, about the nature of poverty and disadvantage, and about the relative roles of the state, the private sector, and the community itself (from individual citizens to voluntary associations to formally constituted nonprofits) in addressing it. They also *engage* communities differently based in part on these assumptions. Thus, community may be seen primarily as *context*, to be "taken account of" in planning and decision making around service provision, social planning and development priorities, or other kinds of investment or action. In this way, understanding community circumstances and dynamics and the ways they are likely to affect community members (what they need, the barriers they face, the resources and relationships on which they may rely) may inform, among other things, the types of services provided, location and collocation strategies, approaches to outreach and engagement, and styles of interaction and intervention. Community may also be defined as a *target of intervention*, not merely taken account of but in which particular aspects of the community are identified and prioritized for change through planned intervention. This may include, for example, programs to provide housing, address issues of crime, or promote employment or commercial development. Third, community may be treated as a *unit of identity and action*, with particular actors and capacities that can be brought to bear to foster change locally or provide a foundation for broader social action (Chaskin, 2006). Here, beyond targeting particular aspects of the community and attempting to promote change in particular domains —more housing, safer streets, better jobs—the focus may be on enhancing the "capacity" of the community to manage, promote, and sustain particular kinds of change and to provide for the well-being of its members over time, or on mobilizing the community to make demands of state or market actors for resources, recognition, or changes in policy, behavior, or investment.

Orientations to community and community practice are also informed—or impinged on—by broader changes in the sociopolitical and economic context over time. The current context has

been shaped in part by a set of changes in the political and economic landscape beginning in the 1970s. These include economic crises; capital mobility; changes in the location and management of industry; an expanding service sector (bifurcated into high- and low-wage segments); new immigration (largely of people of color) leading to increasing ethnic diversity; and a political turn to the right that resulted in (among other things) fewer public resources, a reduced federal role, the devolution of planning and resource allocation to lower levels of government, and an increased emphasis on the private sector, market-oriented responses, and voluntary-sector responsibility. This shift to a post-Fordist, neoliberal order—from national industries to the globalization of production, from unionized to flexible labor, from Keynesianism to neoliberal economic policies, from welfare-state expansion to retrenchment— contributes to new community configurations and circumstances and throws up new challenges to community practice (Sites et al., 2007). In this context, we see at one level the continued evolution of practice on the part of existing community organizations, activists, and community initiatives responding to shifting circumstance and basing strategic and tactical shifts in part on lessons derived from past efforts, in part on negotiating new constraints and opportunities. Some general trends in community development initiatives—toward market-oriented strategies, collaboration and public–private "partnerships," reliance on intermediaries, a focus on "mixed-income" orientations as an effort to balance the tensions of development and gentrification—are ascendant and are notable both in the voluntary sector (such as the work of many contemporary community development corporations and "community-building" initiatives) and in the public sector (such as in the redevelopment of public housing through HOPE VI and the Obama administration's Choice and Promise Neigh borhoods). There are also some realignments and new alliances, for example, in organizing efforts across racial and ethnic groups, between unions and community organizations, or across neighborhoods (and even cross-nationally) to mobilize constituencies to push for policy reform targeting a number of issues (whether immigration rights, health care, or living-wage provisions; e.g., Fine, 2005; Simmons, 1994; Sites et al., 2007; Smith, 2001).

In the context of these changes, community remains relevant as a foundation both for social reproduction—socialization, support, interaction—and for social action. Different orientations to community privilege different dimensions of its potential and frame action in ways that shape (promote or constrain) the nature and degree of social change community practice can accomplish. Considering the multidimensionality of community—as a social, spatial, and political construct—clarifies the different ways community may be engaged as a platform for social change, as well as its potential limitations. An orientation to community, in its multiple dimensions, as a *platform*—a point of departure—for social change also allows for a consideration of how the various boundaries implied by different conceptualizations of community and models of community practice might provide a foundation, in the context of current challenges, for "boundary crossing"—organizing action across social groups (ethnicity, class), across space and scale (cross-neighborhood or cross-national; among organizations working at different levels of intervention), and across sectors (social welfare, housing, labor, business) toward broader impact and social justice (Sites et al., 2007).

Author's Notes

1. In some sense, community practice and local voluntary action have always been a part of American life. Early practice centered largely on the private contributions of local landowners (prior to the assumption of such housekeeping activities by local government) to the creation of streets and public spaces, and on the formation of local associations that provided voluntary labor and resources for the establishment of local collective goods and services

such as fire brigades and sanitation, as well as engagement in civil and political life more broadly (e.g., Tocqueville 1835/1988). Community practice as a more intentional mode of intervention through some combination of planning, locality development, and social action—to use Rothman's (1974) terminology—is, however, most often traced to a stream of efforts beginning with the Progressive Era and the early settlement houses (Fisher, 1994; Halpern, 1995; O'Connor, 1999).

2. Such changes were not always viewed as universally negative; Georg Simmel (1903/1971b), for example, noted the ways in which the anonymity, diversity, and complexity of city life led not just to social distance, impersonal interactions, and defensive maneuvering but also to a kind of freedom to pursue individual expression and direction not possible in the "traditional" rural community. Similarly, Jane Jacobs (1961) argued for the benefits of the kinds of anonymity and informal, casual relationships engendered in well-functioning, diverse, multiuse urban neighborhoods.

3. Social capital has also been criticized on theoretical grounds as tautological, employing a circular logic that posits social capital as simultaneously both cause and effect (Portes, 1998); for the way the notion of social capital appropriates and (uncritically) translates social dynamics and values into economic ones (Cohen & Prusak, 2001); for the way its ambiguities promote its invocation by actors across the ideological spectrum, allowing support for vastly different policy agendas (Woolcock, 1998); and for the ways a focus on social capital can suppress attention to conflict, depoliticize the nature of poverty and marginalization, and suggest responses to them that shift the burden of change to the poor, relieving the state of responsibility (Foley & Edwards, 1997).

4. The other two clusters are the "conduct norms cluster" and the "cosmopolitan efficacy cluster," both of which have low levels of local networks but the latter of which evidences high levels of collective efficacy and strong "organizational and leadership contacts" (Sampson & Graif, 2009, p. 1596).

5. The remainder of this section and the following section on community as "space and place" are based in part on Chaskin (1997).

6. Indeed, different kinds of communities may function differently in terms of satisfying needs or influencing mobility, as shown by a study of 10 low-income neighborhoods that are part of a national comprehensive community initiative (Coulton, Theodos, & Turner 2009). Here, neighborhoods can serve as "incubators" or "launch pads," providing residents with services and supports that either contribute to their wishing to stay (in the first case) or provide them with options to leave (in the second); or as "neighborhoods of choice" that attract newcomers with or without leading to displacement; or as "comfort zones" or "isolating neighborhoods" that may provide for more stable residential patterns for some groups but may offer fewer resources to support resident well-being or social mobility.

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- communities of practice
- neighborhoods
- social capital
- local communities
- community units
- collective efficacy
- neighborhood organizations

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