Connected Communities

The changing nature of 'connectivity' within and between communities

Natasha Macnab, Gary Thomas and Ian Grosvenor

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

The changing nature of 'connectivity' within and between communities

Natasha Macnab, Gary Thomas and Ian Grosvenor

Executive Summary

- The ways communities are connected with each other and with the 'outside world' vary. In some groups strong internal bonds may exclude outsiders, while in others the connections enable a more inclusive approach to the world. Troubled communities tend to have more connections of the strongly bonded, exclusive kind.

- Structural and economic features of a society may affect the nature of connections within communities, and more work is needed on the effects of steep income gradients on the nature of communities locally as well as nationally.

- Community cohesion initiatives appear in many cases to have been successful, but further research is needed on the conditions that enable communities to develop cross-cutting forms of connectedness rather than strong, internal bonds.

- Social networking and other communication technology is enabling new kinds of 'virtual' community connections to form but these tend to reinforce existing kinds of community and may be restricted to particular kinds of user.

- People need to connect with others and to find identity in the connections they make; where opportunity for connection is weak, criminal offending is higher. Gangs may serve the purpose of giving identity where other forms of connection do not exist.

Researchers and Project Partners

Natasha Macnab, Gary Thomas and Ian Grosvenor, University of Birmingham

Abdul Majid, Area Youth Officer, Ladywood and Perry Barr
Anita Halliday, St Paul's Trust, Birmingham
Azkar Mohammed, Pioneers Leading the Way, Birmingham

Bagele Chilisa, academic, Botswana
Clayton Shaw, Sampad, Birmingham
David Callahan, Scawdi, Birmingham
Dawn Carr, Birmingham Community Foundation
Deborah Ravetz, Community Artist, W Midlands
Francesca Gobbo, academic, Italy
Hannah Worth, Chamberlain Forum, Birmingham
Ian Ravetz, Priest, W Midlands
Izzy Mohammed, Birmingham City
Jo Burrill, Midland Heart, Birmingham
Joseph Tobin, academic, USA
Maria Figueiredo, academic, Spain
Pataki Gyongyver, academic, Hungary
Susan Spieker, academic, USA
Tom Cahill-Jones, Stirchley Happenings, Birmingham

Key words

Community, connections, cohesion, bonding, bridging, gradients, gangs, networking

The changing nature of 'connectivity' within and between communities

Executive Summary

- The ways communities are connected with each other and with the 'outside world' vary. In some groups strong internal bonds may exclude outsiders, while in others the connections enable a more inclusive approach to the world. Troubled communities tend to have more connections of the strongly bonded, exclusive kind.

- Structural and economic features of a society may affect the nature of connections within communities, and more work is needed on the effects of steep income gradients on the nature of communities locally as well as nationally.

- Community cohesion initiatives appear in many cases to have been successful, but further research is needed on the conditions that enable communities to develop cross-cutting forms of connectedness rather than strong, internal bonds.

- Social networking and other communication technology is enabling new kinds of 'virtual' community connections to form but these tend to reinforce existing kinds of community and may be restricted to particular kinds of user.

- People need to connect with each other and to find identity in the connections they make; where opportunity for connection is weak, criminal offending is higher. Gangs may serve the purpose of giving identity where other forms of connection do not exist.

This literature review aimed to explore the nature of connectedness inside and between communities and this discussion paper is structured around five subheadings on the theme of connectedness. In it, we give indicative examples of the literature sourced. The review was informed by an expert advisory group and a continuing online discussion involving international partners.

The different research perspectives on the forms of connectedness

Here we examined conceptualisations of the kinds of connections which can form, tie and strengthen community – and, importantly, the significance of these for the kinds of communities constructed. For insights on how notions of connectivity have changed over time we took as a starting point the ideas of a range of social commentators extending back as far as Hanifan (1916, 1920) to more recent observers such as Bourdieu (1983), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995, 2000).

Putnam's work is particularly relevant, discussing social capital as the connectedness among people – the '… norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness' within communities (2000: 19). Following Putnam, we explored the kinds of connectivity that lead to social trust in a community and civic engagement – or their obverse.

It is suggested by Putnam that varieties of connectivity are characterised by differences between *bonding* (that is to say, exclusive) and *bridging* (inclusive) activity in a community. Bonding will reinforce within communities exclusive identities, conformity, solidarity and exclusion – called the 'dark side' of community by Noddings (1996: 258) – while bridging social capital will be more outward-looking. Bridging assets are better for generating broader identities and reciprocity: 'Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD40' (Putnam, 2000: 22-23). Or, as Harriss and De Renzio 1997: 926) suggest, civic engagement may give access to social capital for some but it implies social exclusion for others.

Importantly, bonding and bridging have been used in analyses of social capital internationally, particularly where there are conspicuous tensions within or between communities. For example, Brough et al (2006), looking at social capital amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders note that the family provides strong bonding while a history of racism and discrimination mean that islanders are less amenable to bridging. Hawkins and Maurer (2010) looked at social capital in New Orleans following hurricane Katrina: 'Participants described a process through which close ties (bonding) were important for immediate support, but bridging and linking social capital offered pathways to longer term survival and wider neighborhood and community revitalization'. Geys and Murdoch (2008) examined voluntary association membership in Flanders, noting that both forms operate but that the conceptualisation of the forms in the literature stereotypes bridging as good and bonding as bad. They note that bonding can also be helpful, by providing a vital source of support to disadvantaged people. Their analysis offers an extension of the bridging concept by drawing a distinction between external bridging (i.e. between networks) and internal bridging (within networks). Looking at community relations in Northern Ireland, Leonard (2004) noted that the political conflict in Northern Ireland had enabled the development of bonding social capital; for bridging social capital to emerge, the conditions that led to the development of bonding social capital needed to be undermined.

The issue is thus about more than these surface manifestations of community structure – a point emphasized by Morrow (2001), who argues that the use of the bridging/bonding distinction distracts attention from economic and political factors in the origins and experiences of groups. The consensus is, then, that there may be a false simplicity engendered by the separation of bonding and bridging.

Communities as complex systems (cultural, social, economic, infrastructural etc)

There is strong evidence that a steep 'gradient' of difference in income exaggerates alienation, and poorer outcomes – in many areas, from health to education – within and

between national communities (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Looking at the negative consequences for inclusion to a local community where gradients are steep, Willms (1999: 85) notes that attempts have been made in some areas for the deliberate construction of community that involve initiatives for, for example, parental participation and site-based governance in schools. Where this happens, parents are more likely to connect with the community in governance and as volunteers. There is little further evidence of the consequences of gradient differences at a local level and more research is needed here.

There are shifting patterns of connectivity shaping the organisation of the new kinds of communities that are forming. Bang (2004), for example, talks of new kinds of 'culture governance' wherein internal control moves to more spontaneous, less organized groups of people. Calhoun (1998) points to the importance of technology in the formation of new communities, noting that technology may do more to foster 'categorical identities' than the alternative in dense, systematic networks of relationships: in terms, for example, of protest movements research indicates that while technology allows popular mobilization, it also makes it possible for short-lived protest activity to outlive more solidly based community. Kelemen and Smith (2001) raise a similar issue, pointing to the construction of the 'neo-tribe' formed by the virtual community. Friedland (2001) goes so far as to suggest that the idea of community in a postindustrial society is in fact a misnomer and proposes the concept of the 'communicatively integrated community' as a frame for understanding the central role of communication in producing community.

Such literature appears to confirm the notion of 'liquid modernity', which Bauman (2000) has used to describe the decline of connectivity in contemporary society. The evidence appears to be that community can become a misnomer as connections are attenuated in a world of increasing diversity and fragmenting order. But, as with bridging/bonding, this conceptualization should not be allowed to mask the significance of political and economic features (such as income gradient) in structuring the nature of community.

The connections between communities and their environment

The Parekh Report (2000) speaks of a 'community of citizens and communities', with the prime focus needing to be on identity rather than ethnicity or faith-based allegiance. The recent ethnographies of Atran (2010) have borne out the assertions of the Commission in that alienation from a majority community may find its origins less in views borne of religion or ethnicity and more in simply-forged identity among members of particular kinds of minority community. Atran's work offers an analytical purchase on community and our review has therefore looked at the extent to which simple categorisations built on ethnicity, faith or origin deny the extent to which belonging and identity are constructed in alternative ways in new kinds of community.

Our review here was informed by our expert group consisting of community group organisers from the West Midlands area. It discussed, for example, whether 'top-down' action from national or local government is helpful in the construction and facilitation of community. Looking at the government's 'community cohesion' programme

(in, for example, Derbyshire's intergenerational programme and the Lancashire Community Cohesion Partnership as well as local government support for community groups), the group insisted on the basis of their own experience that resourcing for such groups was essential. The literature supports this: groups benefit from 'nourishment'.

The literature throws light on this in other ways also. McGhee (2005) and Werbner (2005), for example, both point to the need to move beyond characterisations of 'problematic' communities in ethnic and religious minority focus, with multiculturalism, Werbner argues, needing to be seen in historical context: 'multicultural citizenship must be grasped as changing and dialogical, inventive and responsive, a negotiated political order.' Likewise, Vasta (2010) notes that 'Discourses about difference have become more exclusionary and nationalistic, while social cohesion is often being redefined to equate with homogeneity and assimilation.' In a similar vein, Wakefield and Poland (2005) suggest from their analysis that '… approaches to community development and social capital should emphasise the importance of a conscious concern with social justice'.

In his classic work, Wenger (2000) looked at 'modes of belonging'. While communities have a sense of a joint enterprise and 'mutuality', he notes, we shouldn't romanticise: witch hunts were also community enterprises. Connectivity in a community can be promoted by a number of means: people who will broker relationships; signals and symbols of membership; learning projects, and the presence of artefacts such as books and websites.

The analysis in Wenger's work offers solutions to some of the difficulties raised in the literature about stereotyping, by offering an 'anatomy of identity' in community. The need for such an anatomy is evidenced in Putnam's (2007) work with communities of various kinds. He suggests that '… in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods residents of all races tend to 'hunker down' … In the long run, however, successful immigrant societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross-cutting forms of social solidarity and more encompassing identities.'

The impact of technological change, including information and communication technologies, on connectivity

We examined here the significance of wikis, blogs and social networking phenomena such as Facebook and Twitter. Are new communities forming where others have broken up or changing?

Smith et al (2008) draw on evidence showing that the ability to use and benefit from today's social media depends on the existence of tools that allow users to participate: in order to participate, users must be able to find resources (both people and information) that they find valuable. Social context is all-important here. Thus the already-connected are enabled and enfranchised while those who are not are excluded. A linked finding is made by Liff and Steward (2001) who stress that community e-gateways need to call upon social connections that are already robust and are able to provide opportunities for interactive learning and content creation.

Others concur with the general theme of new technology tending to enhance already-existing links, stressing that the effects of social networking may exaggerate rather than attenuate the consequences of exclusion. Rosson et al (2009), for example, talk of the effects of the under-representation of women in computer science.

Most work on wikis (e.g. Kumar, 2009; Lambert and Fisher, 2009) stress their use in education rather than in the facilitation of community. It is perhaps too early to see the infiltration of wikis to established communities: it may be the case that specifically resourced attempts to disseminate such developments are necessary.

Literature tends to stress the consequences of social networking for professional communities of one kind or another. Carnaby and Sutherland (2009) for example, stress the potential of ordinary citizens to develop as authors, content creators, filmmakers, blog diarists, etc.

Memmi (2010) highlights many of the issues in asking if virtual communities are simply ordinary social groups in electronic form, or are fundamentally different. He suggests that 'traditional' communities are based on personal relations while networked communities are bound by functional, more impersonal links. The virtual communities are therefore fundamentally unlike traditional communities. Extending this theme, Ellison et al (2007) show that virtual communities may help to extend those that are under 'threat' in some way (e.g. through natural dispersal), perhaps emphasising the restricted nature of the population for whom the virtual community is currently relevant. This is borne out by Lampe et al (2006) who showed that communities are formed more from connections that are made *off*line rather than *on*line. There is clearly potential for the expansion of the virtual community for currently disenfranchised groups.

The potentially negative consequences of connectedness within communities

In looking at 'negative consequences' we have taken especially seriously the lack of connectivity that occurs in new kinds of community as evidenced by observations of the kind made in the Cantle Report (2005) that '… many communities operate on the basis of a series of parallel lives. These lives often do not seem to touch at any point, let alone overlap and promote any meaningful interchanges'.

We see the inclination to connect as a powerful one which provides identity and cohesion and we see also the possibility of a variety of kinds of connection, sometimes negative, always occurring where the Cantle Report's 'parallel lives' exist. There is a wealth of explanatory theory that postulates forms of connectivity here in identity: social theorists have noted that labelling and exclusion by and from majority communities may contribute to powerful 'bonding' connections of a potentially self-destructive kind. Much of this understanding originated in the analyses of Cohen (1955) and Matza (1964), who looked to status, comparison and identity to account for 'delinquent' acts.

This is borne out in more recent research. Mccarthy and Hagan (1995) suggest that embeddedness in networks of deviant associations provides access to tutelage that

helps the acquisition of criminal skills and attitudes. They call this 'criminal capital' (by contrast with 'social capital'). Their analysis raises doubts about assertions that crimes are crudely impulsive acts. Likewise, Sampson and Groves (1989) in two surveys of around 10,000 residents in UK localities showed that variations in social disorganisation between communities were connected with criminal offending. Deuchar (2008), working with Glasgow gangs and community groups suggests that 'the dark side of social capital is very much at work within the young people's communities'.

While our own expert group rejected any strong gang-related explanation for the recent (August 2011) disturbances in Birmingham, the literature reinforces the proposition that gangs provide alternative kinds of community in which members may develop new kinds of social capital from which it will be extremely difficult to move away.

Recommendations for further research

- Given the confirmation of the broad utility of bonding and bridging across a range of work (notwithstanding the tendency of the distinction to mask structural determinants of community characteristics), particularly in troubled communities, we suggest that research needs to be carried out on the activities, work, organisation, etc. that characterise bonding and bridging in practical circumstances.
- While much research has been undertaken at a national level on the significance of income gradients, there has been far less work on their significance at community level. Research to explicate the effects of, for example, adjacency of communities between which there are steep gradients would be useful, given their significance at national level.
- Top down action, as for example in the community cohesion programme, appears to be successful in connecting communities, is valued by community group leaders and should be promoted. Research specifically on good practice is needed.
- Ways for brokering relationships within communities, fostering group membership, and promoting the employment of artefacts such as books and websites (as 'symbols' of community group identity) should be sought in any attempts to support community. Practical implementation should be researched.
- New technology offers opportunities for community connection, but is currently used by a limited range of people; research is needed on ways of spreading the benefits more widely, and how in schools and colleges young people can get the the opportunity to discuss and learn about a wider range of media.
- Gangs offer identity to disadvantaged young people; alternative sources of group identity for young people – for example in clubs, after-school activities and work schemes – need to be more widely available. Research should seek ways of making additional activity of this kind work.

References and external links

Atran, S. (2010) *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What it Means to Be Human*. London: Allen Lane.

Bang, Henrik P. (2004) Culture governance: governing self-reflexive modernity *Public Administration*, 82, 1, 157–190

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (1983) Forms of capital. In: J. C. Richards (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education.* New York: Greenwood Press.

Brough, M., Bond, C., Hunt, J., Jenkins, D., Shannon, C., Schubert, L. (2006) Social capital meets identity: Aboriginality in an urban setting, *Journal of Sociology*, 42, 4, 396-411.

Calhoun, C. (1998) Community without Propinquity Revisited: Communications Technology and the Transformation of the Urban Public Sphere *Sociological Inquiry* 68, 3, 373–397.

Cantle Report (2005) Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team chaired by Ted Cantle. London: Home Office.

Carnaby, P. and Sutherland, S. (2009) Citizen-created content, digital equity and the preservation of community memory, World Library and Information Congress, 75th IFLA General Conference and Assembly, Milan, Italy, 2009.

Cohen, A.K. (1955) *Delinquent Boys*. New York: Free Press.

Coleman, J.S. (1988) Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, *94* (Supplement), S95-S120.

Deuchar, R. (2008) 'We need to cross to the other side and there are gangs there ...': A study of social capital, gangs and marginalised youth in Glasgow, Paper presented at ECER, University of Gothenburg, 11 September 2008.

Ellison, N.B., Steinfield, C. and Lampe, C. (2007) The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 4, 1143–1168.

Freidland, L.A. (2001) Communication, Community, and Democracy Toward a Theory of the Communicatively Integrated Community, *Communication Research*, 28, 4, 358-391.

Geys, B. and Murdoch, Z. (2008) How to make head or tail of 'bridging' and 'bonding'?: addressing the methodological ambiguity, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 59, 3, 435–454.

Hanifan, L. J. (1916) The rural school community centre, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67: 130-138.

Hanifan, L. J. (1920) *The Community Centre*. Boston: Silver Burdett.

Harriss, J., and De Renzio, P. (1997) Missing Link or Analytically Missing? The Concept of Social Capital, *Journal of International Development*, 9, 7, 919-37.

Hawkins, R.L. and Mauer, K. (2010) Bonding, Bridging and Linking: How Social Capital Operated in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 6, 1777-1793.

Kellermen, M. and Smith, W. (2001) Community and its 'virtual' promises: a critique of cyberlibertarian rhetoric, *Information, Communication & Society,* 4, 3.

Kumar, S. (2009) Building a Learning Community using Wikis in Educational Technology Courses, Proceedings of Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2009 (pp. 2848-2852). Chesapeake, VA: AACE.

Lambert, J. & Fisher, J. (2009) Wiki-based Distance Learning: Interpreting Effectiveness Through the Community of Inquiry Framework Proceedings of Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2009 (pp. 429-434). Chesapeake, VA: AACE

Lampe, C., Ellison, N.B. and Steinfield, C. (2006) A face(book) in the crowd: social Searching vs. social browsing In CSCW '06: Proceedings of the 2006 20th anniversary conference on Computer supported cooperative work (2006), pp. 167-170.

Leonard, M. (2004) Bonding and bridging social capital: reflections from Belfast *Sociology*, 38, 5 927-944

Liff, S. and Steward, F. (2001) Community e-gateways: locating networks and learning for social inclusion, *Information, Communication & Society*, 4, 3, 317-340.

Matza, D. (1964) *Delinquency and Drift*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Mccarthy, B. and Hagan, J. (1995) Getting into Street Crime: The Structure and Process of Criminal Embeddedness, *Social Science Research*, 24, 1, 63-95.

McGhee, D. (2005) Patriots of the Future? A Critical Examination of Community Cohesion Strategies in Contemporary Britain, *Sociological Research Online*, 10, 3.

Memmi, D. Sociology of Virtual Communities and Social Software Design in *Handbook of Research on Web 2.0, 3.0, and X.0: Technologies, Business, and Social Applications*.

Morrow, V. (2001) Young people's explanations and experiences of social exclusion: retrieving Bourdieu's concept of social capital, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 21, 4/5/6, pp.37–63.

Noddings, N. (1996) On community, *Educational Theory*, 46: 245-267.
Parekh Report (2000) The Report on the Commission on The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain - The Parekh Report. London: Profile Books Ltd.
Putnam, R. (1995) Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, *6*, 65-78.
Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Putnam, R.D. (2007) E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30, 2, 137–174.

Rosson, M.B., Carroll, J.M. Zhao, D. and Paone, T. (2009) wConnect: a facebook-based developmental learning community to support women in information technology, Proceedings of the fourth international conference on Communities and technologies, ACM New York, NY, USA.

Sampson, Robert J., and W. Byron Groves (19899) Community structure and crime: Testing social-disorganization theory, *American Journal of Sociology,* 94, 4, 774-802. Reprinted in Frances Cullen and Velmer Burton, eds., Contemporary Criminological Theory. Dartmouth Publishing Co., 1994.

Smith, M., Barash, V., Getoor, L. and Lauw, H. W. (2008) Leveraging social context for searching social media, SSM '08 Proceeding of the 2008 ACM workshop on Search in social media, ACM New York, NY, USA.

Vasta, E. (2010) The controllability of difference: Social cohesion and the new politics of solidarity, *Ethnicities*, 10, 4, 503-521.

Wakefield, E.L. and Poland, B. (2005) Family, friend or foe? Critical reflections on the relevance and role of social capital in health promotion and community development, *Social Science & Medicine*, 60, 12, 2819-2832.

Wenger, E. (2000) Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems, *Organization*, 7, 2, 225-246.

Werbner, P. (2005) The translocation of culture: 'community cohesion' and the force of multiculturalism in history, *Sociological Review*, 53, 4, 745-768.

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The spirit level: why more equal societies almost always do better*. London: Allen Lane.

Willms, J. D. (1999) Quality and Inequality in Children's Literacy: The Effects of Families, Schools and Communities, in D. Keating and C. Hertzman (Eds.) Developmental *Health and the Wealth of Nations: Social, Biological, and Educational Dynamics*. New York: Guilford Press.

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

> "*to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.*"

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx