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Difficult Dialogues: Toward Building Community Through Conversation

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the construct of community: its nature, ontological significance, and role in society, as well as determining factors in community fragmentation and the role constructive dialogues can play in community building. With this knowledge, a campus conversation was orchestrated to explore students' perceptions of our community and wicked problems confronting our world. Students were asked the ways in which they engage with their communities, what barriers they identify as inhibiting community cohesion, and potential paths for progress. Challenges with orchestration as well as student responses are discussed. This paper concludes that, among this demographic, there is very little emphasis on engagement in geographic communities, and little thought on the concept of community as a whole. Despite challenges faced, continuation of conversational opportunities should be prioritized as participants learn the importance of community engagement while simultaneously acting as participants in community building.

Keywords: community, dialogue, wicked problems, university campus, lateralization

Introduction

Due to the pervasive influence of the internet, the global community is more connected than ever; as such, we are increasingly informed about global challenges, and we can more easily see the impacts of these challenges reflected in our own communities. These global societal issues are many, varied, and by nature "wicked." First coined in 1974, the term "wicked" describes complex problems without definitive solutions; when it comes to issues such as these, the most promising approach "is one which attempts to identify preferred directions rather than optimal solutions; one that focuses on coping with problems rather than solving them" (Catron, 1981, p.2).

This project began as an effort to host a community conversation about a wicked global issue impacting neighborhoods and peoples in the Upstate; first, to pinpoint a specific issue through community consensus, and then to orchestrate a dialogue in which participants communicate, learn, and identify "preferred directions" of progress. However, research into the perspectives of Upstate students, as well as the wider community (spanning age, race, and social status), as to the relevance and potential prioritization of these global problems on a local scale revealed a striking hurdle: a lack of community cohesion. With this realization, focus on the importance of any single issue impacting the community became less important than simply having a community conversation, with the potential benefits of realizing shared values, increasing empathy, and building a stronger community overall. Due to these initial findings, the focus of the project shifted and the research objective became bilateral: to learn about the fragmentation of the geographic community, and to actively engage students, through deliberative conversation, in community building.

Unfortunately, the issue of community is not only conceptual, but semantic. Therefore, the questions are not only "what is community and how does it contribute to society?" but also "what does the term *community* mean?" Coburn & Gormally (2017) propose three answers: community as physical space, community as virtual environment (i.e. online games or social media groups),

and community as social practice (for example, a community of runners). Though useful for signification, this semantic fluidity lends little meaning to the concept. While participating in online groups and gathering with like-minded individuals can be beneficial, this type of socialization does not constitute actual community engagement. Alternately, the geographic community is not always synonymous with feelings of similarity and belonging, but it is composed of many varying individuals, with different perspectives and ideas, that coalesce to form a foundation stronger for its diversity. As Wróbel (2016) remarks, communities should be thought of in categories of “difference and multiplicity, instead of the language of identity and belonging” (Wróbel, 2016, p. 10). This integrative community, this community of physical space, begets society which begets civilization; it is fundamental to our species.

However, the circumstances of modernity (technology, travel, globalization) have stretched thin the foundation of the geographic community. Many feel unmotivated to try to relate to those around them because they can simply go online and find a cyber “community” that agrees with and reinforces their worldview. According to Prier (2017), rates of occurrences of online homophily rise concurrently with social media usage, creating “echo chambers” where news is shared and discussed only among like-minded, similarly predisposed users. Furthermore, though supporting individuals in our community and shopping locally is encouraged, in practice it is more affordable and more convenient to shop at Amazon or Walmart. This privileging of corporately owned business over small business diminishes the interdependency and communal support that helps to establish cohesive communities (Breznitz & Taylor, 2014).

But these conveniences, these paths of least resistance, are not without consequence. According to *Science News*, “Rates of severe, almost incapacitating depression have increased in each succeeding generation since 1915...[with] increasing frequency of depression in succeeding younger groups” (Bower, 1992). The cyclical link between depression, loneliness, and substance abuse has been well documented, with each condition at turns initiating and maintaining the others: a lonely person is more likely to feel depressed and take drugs, and a drug user is more likely to suffer from loneliness and depression (Rokach, 2005). In correlation with these findings, alongside rising rates of depression The National Institutes of Health (2022) report that drug abuse disorders are endemic in the United States; the same institution reports that the “age-adjusted suicide rate” in the U.S. increased 35.2% from 2000 to 2018. These conditions consistently link to a lack of social relations, with Akerlind & Hornquist (1992) concluding, “dependence on drugs is, accordingly, an actual substitute for dependence on others.” Further correlating, as of 2021 Harvard’s “Making Caring Common Project” reported preliminary data that suggests “36% of all Americans - including 61% of young adults - feel ‘serious loneliness.’”

Statistics like these illuminate the critical social situation that is evolving around the globe. It is unrealistic to simplify these complex conditions down to a common denominator, a “lack of community,” as the causes that precede these effects are multifactorial and hard to quantify: “wicked.” But the phenomena represented by these statistics are not happening independently. This paper, then, argues that lack of emphasis on basic community *is* a primary contributing factor: a contextual basis in which innumerable negative social effects find root, and eventually stem into complex societal issues. Our most pressing wicked problem surpasses such easily identifiable issues as inequity and environmental concerns, to something more fundamental: disconnectedness.

Literature Review

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, researchers from various fields of social science conducted an integrated study of the American community based on social relations in a relatively small

California community, whose population was composed of various ethnicities. This study culminated in a paper published by Aginsky in 1952, entitled “The Fragmentation of the American Community.” This paper centers on “locus community” as a geographic location of unspecified size and introduces the term “lateralization” in reference to the various social groups that exist within and beyond the geographic confines of the locus community. These lateralizations are related to various identifiers such as race, ethnicity, occupation, religion, and politics (Aginsky, 1952). This study finds that if community members face discrimination within the locus community, lateralization increases. Furthering Aginsky’s investigation, Kaufman (1959) differentiates the various groups that exist within a community (or *local society*) not solely on the existence of shared identifiers, but on their “processes” of action, suggesting that processes of lateralization “orient social life beyond the locality,” while processes of localization “focus on life within the locality and its distinctiveness” (Kaufman, 1959, p. 10). The existence of various social groups within a given community is unavoidable, and each group can at times take part in processes that detract from the community, and at other times, build the community. However, Aginsky (1952) concludes that preferential participation in lateralizations fragments the locus community, dispossessing it of individuals and resources alike, and this fragmentation is only facilitated by increased mobility. Both researchers agree that a balance must be maintained between the prioritization of local and lateral processes but, “when a choice is present, the community must be primary...the community can continue without the lateralization, but the lateralization cannot continue without the community” (Aginsky, 1952, p.9; Kaufman, 1952).

Aginsky posits three drivers of decreased community involvement: increased mobility, greater acceptance and commonality in lateralizations, and discrimination within the community. The second and third premises are rooted in the complex nature of human interaction. In a study focused on social justice, Israel & Frenkel (2017) suggest that individuals who share life experiences often share frameworks of existence, including belief and value systems, as well as predispositions of thought. Likewise, Fischer & Mattson (2009) note that, “similarity promotes connections among some people,” and a sense of disconnectedness from others (p.11). An individual is more comfortable engaging in a group with which they share a framework of existence, ultimately reinforcing rather than challenging or exploring their own beliefs and predispositions. Engaging in like-minded lateralizations in moderation can be affirming, but to engage this way exclusively can result in a sense of disconnectedness from others and the adoption of an “us-them” mentality (Kinder & Kam, 2012); from this mentality stems an unwillingness to find commonality, and run-of-the-mill disagreements run the risk of becoming seemingly unbridgeable social divides. Moreover, thoughtful, informative discussions are the basis of a deliberative democracy; these conversations revitalize civic culture and “generate the political will necessary to take effective action on pressing problems” (Weeks, 2000, p.3). Differing perspectives spur involvement and, ultimately, social change (“productive conflict”), while continued unwillingness to engage with groups viewed as *other* promotes civic stagnation (Fischer & Mattson, 2009). Therefore, not only does lack of communication between lateral groupings within a community limit the thought-processes of the individuals involved, but it also limits us as a society: divisions widen and opportunity for social change narrows.

Regarding divisions, Fischer & Mattson (2009) claim that, despite media outlets reporting a disunified country fragmented along lines of politics, values, race, and immigration, evidence suggests the largest gap exists among social class. Further, though political elites and “ideologues” have indeed become more polarized, there is much disagreement among social scientists as to whether this polarization extends to the wider American public (Baldassarri & Goldberg, 2014). In a study that analyzed data from 1980 to 2012 regarding political attitudes and voter’s self-identification with mainstream political ideologies, Park (2018) reports mixed evidence of growing polarization. Contrary to divisive media reports and notions of *culture wars*, there is definitive evidence that the American public has become “less polarized on moral issues” (Park, 2018, p. 1). Likewise, though racial and ethnic divisions persist, “residential segregation became

less acute after 1970, economic differences shrank, and even intermarriage rates...rose noticeably" (Fischer & Mattson, 2009, p.9). Taken altogether, this research supports the thesis of fragmentation at a community level but questions the idea of fragmentation as it relates to American society as a whole. Thus, the issue of community, though deserving of national prioritization, should be addressed at a community level, through community conversation and involvement.

The potential benefits of deliberative community dialogues are far-reaching but, fundamentally, the impact begins with meaningful interactions between individual community members; these "tangible expressions of social relations, catalyzed by common interests" provide the basis upon which "reciprocal trust and social capital is formed" (Hamiduddin, 2017, p.2). The implementation of small-scale, constructive conversations between community members is crucial, therefore, as this technique facilitates the practice of active empathizing (Keen, 2006). While social scientists have long recognized empathy as an evolutionary trait that contributed to the development and survival of our species, Keen suggests that continued human survival still depends upon this ability, as it allows us to relate to others and effectively function in the social contexts we have created. Thus, empathy is a key determiner in forming social relations, and can be productively exploited for positive social consequences. But to understand the true extent of empathy's potential, we must understand the limitations.

There is a resistance to empathize with those we perceive to be different from us in race, weight, age, opinion, etc. Additionally, "empathy's partiality" dictates a willingness to help individuals as opposed to large groups (Keen, 2009; Levin, 2016). The first limitation provides evidence as to why individuals are more willing to communicate and engage in lateralizations (composed of other individuals that they perceive to be similar to themselves), as opposed to integrated communities. The second limitation explains why it is easier to feel unaccountable or even detached when media outlets report the tribulations of entire ethnic groups, while the story of a single individual, their sufferings and struggles intimately related in their own words, can reduce us to tears and induce us to action (Levin, 2016). So, empathy is a potentially positive social force for the purpose of community building, but only if we are cognizant of its limitations. These findings support those of Aginsky (1952) and Israel & Frenkel (2017).

Counteracting these limitations requires prioritization of active communication among community members. Deliberative conversations increase empathy and thereby decrease discrimination and polarization, making community building possible (Weeks, 2000). Moreover, the relationships that form between community members during such conversations highlight social relations and common interests, gluing individuals together and providing incentives for the individual to work for the betterment of the full community (Hamiduddin, 2017).

Productive conversation research often builds on intergroup contact theory, which was introduced by Gordon Allport in 1952. Allport (as cited by Saguy et al., 2009) suggests that the more often opposing groups engage in respectful and productive dialogue, the less prejudice in-group members exhibit toward the out-group. Building on Allport's thoughts, Saguy et al. (2009) posit that positive intergroup contact can produce a false sense of equality in out-group members, making them less motivated to seek or support social change, thereby perpetuating structural inequality. However, in *community*-based conversations, participants work to bridge divides and improve social relations for the shared purpose of bettering the community as a whole. Community is larger than a single individual or group, and while creating positive social relations alone is not enough, it is an important step in the realization of common goals. Effective engagement must have active, cooperative intent (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2012). According to Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane's (2012) cultural model, culture is produced by participation, engagement, coordination, and involvement. By this model, individuals who are working together to actively shape their communities are not reproducing or perpetuating existing

ways of life, they are creating a new way of life, a new and vibrant culture: a culture of community, commonality, and purpose.

Research Parameters

Research for this project was conducted in two parts: first informant canvassing to inform the basis of an orchestrated community conversation, and second through said community conversation. This section will outline the research approach employed, as well as methods employed in orchestrating the conversation itself.

As the initial goal of this project was to research how global issues impact Upstate communities, an opinion poll was distributed to sixty community members, on and off campus. Thirty-three persons were emailed the poll and twenty-seven were asked face-to-face. The basis for selection was convenience sampling. Participants were asked what they considered to be the most pressing problem impacting this community; polling was conducted over the span of two days, in person as well as through email. The content and nature of responses motivated further research into the construct of community in general.

Based on the results from the poll and voiced concern that mixing students with faculty and staff might cause reticence to participate amongst students, it was decided that the conversation would be open only to the student population, as opposed to including faculty, staff, and the wider geographic community. Student outreach was implemented in person and online to advertise and encourage attendance for the conversation. Thirteen students were informed of the conversation in person and asked to attend. Fifteen active student organizations were group emailed and informed of the conversation, then later emailed individually with a personal appeal for attendance and support. A message advertising the conversation was published in the student newsletter, and a flyer with the same purpose was designed and posted on the Instagram page of the USC Upstate Office of Student Involvement. All methods of outreach emphasized the informality of the conversation, and offered students snacks as incentive for attendance.

A room was reserved in the Humanities and Performing Arts Center and desks were arranged in an open circle to facilitate natural conversation.

Results

First, the results from the initial opinion poll, which asked “What do you think is the most pressing global challenge affecting our community?” Of the thirty-three participants who were emailed, eight responded (approximately 24%). Though the response rate was relatively high, each participant responded with a different answer. Likely due to social expectation, all of the twenty-seven community members who were questioned in person responded. Answers were extremely varied, with minimal overlap. Five participants expressed indifference. Five expressed concerns related to the economy, citing wealth inequality, inflation, and rising housing prices as the most pressing issues. Two expressed health related concerns, respectively citing the prioritization of mental health and vaccines as the most pressing issues. Other responses ranged from religion to the Ukrainian war, to the death of Queen Elizabeth. From these results there was no discernable community consensus but rather budding evidence for a lack of cohesion and engagement.

Efforts to rally support for the event followed much the same pattern. Of the students who were invited in person, one agreed to attend; the remaining twelve were invited as a group, and, though there were various head nods in response, there were no verbal responses either accepting or declining the invitation. The multiple emails sent to various student organizations

(many of which purport civic engagement as a cornerstone of their organization), garnered two responses, each replying that they would try to make it. The advertisement in the student newsletter prompted one student to email asking for details on the event. Notably, the Instagram post received the most engagement, with thirty-seven likes. It is unclear what percentage of these likes were generated by USC Upstate students, but considering the account is a USC Upstate account, it is likely the response was composed of current students and perhaps some alumni.

Despite the interest shown, no students attended the event. Two instructors did attend, having seen the advertisements that were targeted at students. One instructor teaches a section of UNIV 101, "Introduction to the University," and invited the student leader of this project to discuss the topic of conversation with her class. Outcomes of this discussion appear below.

Discussion

The lack of student attendees at the original conversation, albeit disappointing, had been a hypothesized possibility. In line with Aginsky's observations on community fragmentation, there is little recognition of the importance of the geographic community. Involvement in social groups that engage in processes of lateralization as opposed to processes of localization (Kaufman, 1959) is often mistakenly categorized as community involvement, while the fundamental role that locus communities play in society is unemphasized or unrealized. This outcome also highlighted an obstacle that was not considered in the decision to make the conversation a campus-only event: the particular difficulties of engaging youth in community. In full disclosure, it was this non-attendance that brought us to examine the concept of lateralization more fully. In future attempts, participation in lateralizations should be considered as a potential lever for motivation in attendance, as should other approaches for engaging youth.

In this case, excluding faculty, staff, and other community members did not result in student willingness to participate. As the student leader worked to coordinate the conversation, several faculty members were enlisted for help. These individuals commended the student's effort and expressed passionate support for the initiative, pledging to help in any way they could. This active support, though small in scale, presents a stark contrast to the passive support shown by the students. The most significant student response was shown on social media, and it was not at all mirrored in action. It may be that inviting faculty, staff, and other community members could have yielded participants for the desired conversation. This should be considered in the next iteration of campus conversation.

The findings (or failings) of this attempted conversation raise specific questions as to why younger generations are generally less inclined to show support for community building exercises, even as they suffer disproportionately from negative social conditions that are associated with a lack of community cohesion: higher rates of loneliness, depression, and suicide. Furthermore, what role does social media and increased screen time play in this lack of community engagement? Many students expressed support for the event on social media but failed to attend. Do younger people consider involvement in online "communities" to be actual community involvement? If so, could this preference for passive online activism inhibit social involvement in real life? Could it be that factors unknown in the 1950s drive modern lateralization? These areas require more research.

One of the instructors who attended teaches a freshman class in which she emphasizes the importance of community, and she invited the student researcher to discuss the topic with her class. Though we had hoped the community conversation would be composed of students who attended voluntarily, motivated by a genuine interest in community, this opportunity afforded a chance to explore the initial research questions as well as the questions that arose from the failure of the previous dialogic attempt. The following section explores this conversation.

Reprise (Parameters, Findings, & Discussion, Part II)

The class consisted of fourteen freshmen, aged 18-20; six students were from counties in the Upstate other than Spartanburg. The instructor chose to leave the room so as not to influence the participation or responses of the students, and to maintain the original goal of a fully student conversation.

When asked whether or not community was important, each student agreed. When prompted to share what community meant to them, or where they engaged with community, several students expressed that they felt a sense of community while participating in student organizations or attending school sporting events. The students from counties other than Spartanburg unanimously expressed a feeling of disconnectedness. Two students shared that they preferred to keep to themselves and not engage with others or attend events. One student said that she felt more connected to others who shared her socioeconomic background, regardless of geographic location (constituting a socioeconomic lateralization). When asked how much time they spend on their phones in a day, answers ranged from thirty minutes to eight hours, with an average of three to four hours being spent on social media or chatting with friends.

All students agreed that there were no engaging activities for young people in the community (thereby displaying an understanding of community engagement only tangential to the one adopted for this study), and expressed as a group that, in order to have fun, one had to travel out of town. When asked about divisions in the community only one student answered, replying that social divides were the greatest division. Finally, when questioned on the most effective method for engaging their age group in a community event, one student reported paper flyers, while several others expressed that engaging them in person was the best approach.

During this interaction, three students seemed consistently engaged and two seemed entirely disinterested. The remaining students exhibited varying degrees of interest, but an unwillingness to participate unless directly called upon. Though they all agreed that community was important, they seemed unsure how to conceptualize it, and none associated community with geographic location. Instead, they seemed to associate the idea of community with feelings of belonging and acceptance: symptoms of lateralization.

The impact of increased mobility on community was evidenced both by the disconnected feeling experienced by the students who came from other counties, as well as by the class's general insistence on the necessity of traveling to other towns or cities to "have fun." While a locus community is specific to a certain location, neither community nor place are specific to an individual. Any individual can be an active member in any community, as long as they are willing to engage and communicate with other members of the community and work towards the continual betterment of the community as a whole. Community living, once learned, can be applied in any place. Further, no student made a correlation between the absence of resources for community building in their own community ("nothing fun to do here"), and their preference for traveling to other communities to engage and spend money. This funneling of resources and individuals from the locus community is the detraction that Aginsky (1952) spoke of when discussing the detriments of increased participation in lateralizations.

Ultimately, this conversation was individual-centered rather than community-centered. These students were generally unable to express where they experience a sense of community (outside of school events, though the school constitutes a lateralization). As such, the decisions of the students are motivated by individual preferences, as opposed to community needs. Before students can become *active* community members that are engaged in community building, they must first understand what a community is, and its fundamental role in the continuation of our society.

Future study is indicated on the positive impacts that early community engagement and instruction can have on youth. In conjunction with this research, youth engagement initiatives should be prioritized in an effort to mitigate the increasingly negative social conditions that younger generations face.

Conclusion

This project began as an endeavor to learn about the impact of global problems in our community, and research revealed that the most pressing, the most wicked, problem of all is disengagement and lateralization within the community itself. But communities are composed of individuals and the relationships that exist between them; therefore, the problem is a deeper one, involving how we relate to one another as human beings. To begin to heal our broken communities, we must prioritize deliberative interpersonal communication.

We must emphasize active engagement that increases empathy, facilitates the realization of shared values, and promotes social capital. We must prioritize the relationships that build and hold communities together. We must invest in our communities. We must invest in ourselves.

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