

Connected Communities

Community as micro-sociality and the new localism agenda

Valerie Walkerdine and David Studdert



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The Big Society and localism agendas bring to the fore issues of how communities might operate within a time of austerity. This project addresses current concerns by bringing together approaches from history, political philosophy, sociology and the arts, situating the importance of community relationships alongside those of state, market and family (Crow 2004). Working with two community groups in the South Wales town of Abergavenny, the project sought to understand the communal meanings and feelings that make up the act of communing, micro-sociality. Through interviews, focus groups, oral history and community arts, the project demonstrates how community exists in everyday actions, which can form the basis of a localism can be built from the bottom-up. However, there are a number of stumbling blocks to this created by current government agendas, which champion localism, while putting blocks in the way of bottom-up localism.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Community as micro-sociality

Theory and Method

Micro-sociality (Studdert, 2006) is a concept that allows us to think about community as the combination of small everyday actions, where community is not a noun but a verb, communing. It allows us to see communal being-ness as the outcome of constantly created actions of recognition. It is a perspective that allows the community members to partake in communal enhancement, to make an active difference through their own actions. The act of communing itself produces meanings in common and feelings of togetherness or separation. If we begin to look at community in this way, 'community' is not a thing confined to one historical moment, but is contained in series of timeless and on-going activities and as such exists, to some degree or another, everywhere, continually.

Our project was a cross disciplinary project combining political philosophy, sociology, history and arts. It was undertaken with two community groups: Communities First North Abergavenny, a Welsh government programme (on a 1950s/60s council estate, created to deal with slum clearance from the town centre), designed to support deprived communities and the Abergavenny Community Trust, a group set up by volunteers to create a community centre in a Victorian former infants school in the south of the town.

This research used interviews with residents, focus groups, ethnography, oral history and artistic productions undertaken and devised by the community groups themselves. Communities First put on a play and Abergavenny Community Trust made a wall-hanging.

Findings

- Community and the sense of community is a powerful factor in determining people's behaviour in both a 'positive' and a 'negative' sense. Abergavenny is a town with a continuing sense of itself as a community.
- Communing existed in differing degrees and modes throughout the town. The two groups reflected these shades: the working class estate tended to resemble the community of location albeit in a much more complicated and nuanced form than commonly understood; the Abergavenny Community Trust group, centred as they were around a single strand of commonality, tended to approximate sociological notions of a community of interest. However these distinctions should not be taken too literally. In both cases there was significant interaction on an everyday communing level, far in excess of what the literature would suggest (Bauman, 2001) and there was no evidence that community was either something of no relevance nor something which had once existed and had now disappeared (eg Lesser, 2000; Etzioni, 1993; Delanty, 2003; Little, 2002; Bauman, op cit). While it took many forms, communal feeling was sustained by micro-sociality. Everywhere community existed as a desired outcome and a longed-for situation. This was the case even when community was posed as a negative state i.e. when it was perceived as not being active enough or as not being what it once

was. Even in these cases it functioned as a force that people recognized and desired. Indeed the anger about its lack, points to its continued centrality within the social imagination of all Abergavenny residents.

- The recounting and mapping of routes through the town taken by people from the north and south spoke clearly of a significant psycho-geography (Bridger, 2010) in which landmarks became key markers of communing, such as the local Tescos, or of memory, such as the loss of an open air swimming pool. The routes also showed the ways in which the town was strongly divided geographically, with residents of the north feeling often unsafe and unwelcome in town and other locals not wanting to set foot in the north or ignoring that it existed.
- There was a very strong sense of the historical memory prevalent throughout the town. There were a lot of ongoing rituals and shared memories of communityteah Coe. There was a strong sense of community memory particularly in relation to the former open-air swimming pool. Nothing exemplified this more than the play produced written and performed by the North Abergavenny group which centred upon the historical memory of the founding of the estate and the compulsory relocation of inhabitants from the town centre to the periphery during the 1950/60s. The amount of community input into this project plus the sold-out crowd who witnessed it and the atmosphere and interest it evoked not only represented the community-building through micro sociality that we are pointing to, but showed the central value of arts work in the hands of the community and the living presence of communal historical memory generally throughout.
- Both groups' responses to the arts work, were overwhelmingly positive. The response of north Abergavenny residents to the play was huge and the confidence boosting for young and older people alike was strongly remarked upon. The workshops creating the wall-hanging were a great success and much disappointment was expressed when they ended. These activities alone testify to the central importance of community-generated micro-social activities for creating community, yet these kinds of activities are not normally funded or supported.
- The town meeting held at the end of the project brought together young and old people, local councillors, north and south residents in a dialogue about the future of Abergavenny that many said was strongly needed. We created a website with a comments section to take this process further.
- While microsociality and communal feeling existed, an overwhelming sense of powerlessness in relation to action for change and thus bottom-up localism, pervaded the data. There was endless discussion of silent barriers. In the short to

medium term, these barriers were almost exclusively institutional. We have termed these 'silent' because we do not believe that they are intended overtly to curtail or dissuade people from community participation. Rather, this is their total effect. Such barriers include the powerlessness of the town council, often expressed as problems with excessive overlap and demarcation, particularly between the role of town and county councils. The result is that people do not know who to talk to about local problems. Ignored and shunted aside, they feel that no organization can help them solve local problems. The Abergavenny Community Trust, a group of volunteers seeking to utilize an empty school as a community hub, have, over seven years, been confronted by a lengthy drawn-out governance process seemingly so far leading nowhere, except defeat. Additionally, the Communities First project, designed specifically to enhance community has experienced mixed results reportedly because of the restrictions in focus applied by the funding body. Community workers stated that many of their activities specifically designed to support social aspects of communing were not measurable according to government criteria. Building relationships of trust necessary to achieving jobs, educational improvement and reduction of drug use outcomes, is a long-term project built upon trust creation between the organization and the community. Yet these aspects were not considered measurable and as such are ignored even though they are crucial to other outcomes that governments require. Such an approach ignores the fact that community as communing is central to the building of trust. Narrow approaches are counterproductive to stated aims in other ways; what we term 'project obsession' being one, as is the constant desire of local and county bodies to 'own' projects.

- Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the replacement of the open air swimming pool. This pool featured in many interviews. It was seen as a cheap family place, a safe place for families to socialize. Indeed many reported that people had picnics while waiting to get in. It was a hub of communal micro-sociality sustaining and enhancing communal being-ness. It appeared to many residents that the council saw the pool only in economic terms without understanding what role it played in enhancing community. Some local politicians interviewed viewed it as a like for like replacement: an indoor swimming complex for an open-air pool. However in communal terms this is simply not the case for various reasons, all made amply clear in our interviews. Additionally, party politics appropriate at the national level, at the local level, could be understood as undermining of a sense of community and common purpose.

Class, geography, unemployment and history work together in complicated ways to restrain the development of a general communal feeling across Abergavenny. There were once working class communities in the centre of Abergavenny. The relocation of these groups to the periphery of Abergavenny has created a feeling

of exclusion, creative of divisions within the community. People from North Abergavenny feel marginalized by the town while people within the town feel that, in complicated ways, a sense of difference exists between themselves and the people of the North Abergavenny estate. The inhabitants of North Abergavenny complained about lack of services, lack of facilities; stigmatization in regard to local employment; neglect from the town council in regard to service provision and the police in regard to law and order issues. These issues, plus of course wider national issues of class, meant that inhabitants of north Abergavenny felt excluded from discussions relating to the town itself. Conversely people living in what could be termed the old areas of Abergavenny, tended to perceive the estate as a dangerous; not a place to walk at night; a place with its own shops and own facilities (despite this not being the case) and in general tended towards a view which constructed the estate as an 'other'. This was overlaid with national attitudes towards the unemployed, the social welfare system and the working and under-class in general. In regard to work, there were clear handicaps related to income which worked to disqualify people from North Abergavenny in relation not just to local jobs but also to employment in general; something which in turn hampered their attempts to play a full part in the communal life of Abergavenny. Thus class, geography, history, displacement and stigmatization in conjunction with other factors hinder development of an inclusive community within Abergavenny.

- The presence of authority representatives on community boards in many cases was understood as blocking communal involvement simply because the different agendas and priorities of these authorities led them to refuse participation in suggested projects. The result in Abergavenny is that while authority representatives like the police continued to attend local organization meetings, the attendance of community members quickly dropped off.

The impact of these barriers is felt at the micro level in a variety of ways: the drain of volunteer enthusiasm; the prevalence of micro dramas affecting inter-personal relationships, something particularly noticeable on working class estates; the anger and ultimately apathy, generated by perceived partial targeting of resources; the sense of powerlessness which ultimately destroys or hinders volunteer and communal participation and the difficulty community workers have in accessing certain groups. Both our groups reported difficulties related to all these issues and both groups suggested these barriers as the major source of these problems.

These problems led to

*failure of schemes to penetrate deeply into community e.g. the incapacity of programmes like Community First to reach certain groups or to sustain small projects.

Many professional community workers reported that small initiatives routinely aroused initial enthusiasm only for it to quickly dissipate.

*blocking community initiatives, overtly or implicitly.

*incapacity and low morale among town councillors, reflective of a sense of powerlessness on every side

*a fragmented community in which issues of geography and socio economic status are not solved but increased.

*inefficient use of funds.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. There is a deep desire for community and social relations. In many instances community exists in forms invisible to government. But while communal –being-ness is highly valued and can be an incredible force for greater stability and sense of belonging it needs to be given space, value, independence, support and expression.

For localism to succeed there needs to be a paradigmatic cultural shift in the way that governments view community, how it assists it; how it conceives it and how they view and measure it. In many instances the basic requirement for government at all levels is to simply get out of the way. Additionally a coherent user-friendly strategy which aligns conceptual aims and practice across a variety of official bodies and departments is a minimum requirement to engage communal being-ness.

Current community and localism policy begins from the wrong place. It fails to tailor assistance to the specificities of the community targeted and the result is a hotchpotch of intervention projects, practices and priorities from different departments and legislations competing against each other.

Funding is not used efficiently because of this. Rather, practices of governance undermine the stated aim in contradictory ways.

Everyone sees the value of community but for this to be harnessed in a way that will improve people's lot, the government rhetoric has to match and harmonize with government practices at a micro level. If this can be achieved there is a great willingness for ordinary people to take a larger role in their own community and to build a safer and more nurturing communal sense for everyone.

2. The arts and humanities through the use of oral history and creative arts projects has been shown to have a key place in the development of community cohesion.

3. The methods and theoretical perspective adopted in this project allowed us to be investigative and creative simultaneously, uniting method and theory. Through giving stake-holders the money to pursue their own vision of communal being-ness it allowed

them to create something which itself had impact as communal action, the most obvious example being the play. Additionally it allowed us as researchers to see the creation of community through the actions of the two groups. For instance in the focus groups and in the arts activities, we found an Abergavenny community creating itself as a community through discussion and interaction which revealed a willingness to sacrifice their individual views to the group perspective.

4. By placing micro sociality at the centre of investigation of the social, and seeing community as the outcome of meaning in common, as the creation of communal beingness, we have opened up a different way of viewing community, which is central to the possibilities for localism. By working across arts, humanities and social sciences, we have opened up the possibility of hybrid methods, which have given a uniquely productive of doing research.

5. Localism is potentially a great force for social cohesion and the expansion of community, but it is hampered by the inability of government to allow it to work from the bottom up. It is also hampered by government views that community needs to be remade (Putnam, 2000; <http://www.local.gov.uk/localism-act>), rather than supporting the enhancement of what exists.

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Please see project website at:

www.abergavennycommunity.co.uk

This contains details of the arts-based work, the town meeting and oral history interviews.

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."

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