

Untangling the Mess: Community Strength in Rural Australia

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Globalisation, technological development, economic and industry restructuring, deregulation, and the ideological dominance of economic rationalism have resulted in major changes for Australian rural communities. These have included significant demographic shifts, population depletion, rapid growth, economic diversification, service withdrawals and deteriorating social and physical infrastructures (Lawrence and Hungerford, 1994; Cheers, 1996). Clearly, the wellbeing of individuals and whole communities has been affected, with the evidence indicating that the majority of places have suffered declining levels of wellbeing on many indicators including economic growth, employment and unemployment, income and poverty levels, physical and mental health and service access (Cheers, 1998:45-59). Even in rapidly developing communities, such as the Whitsunday Shire in North Queensland, the poor have suffered from, e.g., decreasing availability of low-cost housing, rising costs of goods and services, and increasing demand for local services relative to supply (Bone, Cheers and Hil, 1993a and b; Wilkinson, 1994). At the community level, in both growing and declining communities alike, social cohesion, social infrastructure, community capacity and local resources have diminished as a result of population depletion, reduced incomes, increased work demands, and support service withdrawals (Cheers, 1996, in press). At the same time, private and public services have been reduced or withdrawn from many communities as a result of diminishing populations and competitive-tendering policies (e.g. Boss, 1998; Taylor, 1999).

Clearly, some communities have been resilient in managing these changes while others have not. Although some, no doubt, have been advantaged by their location, natural environments and pre-existing wealth, these factors do not explain the variability between communities in their success at managing change. Why, for example, have communities such as Tumby Bay (Jeffreys and Munn, 1996) and Cowell on the Eyre Peninsula thrived in adverse global, national and local economic contexts while other, apparently better placed, communities have not? Intuitively, we know that some kind of 'community factor' is at work, and some evidence from overseas (Luloff, 1998, 1999) supports this. Economically, socially and culturally more 'successful' and resilient communities do appear to be somehow 'stronger', more resourceful and more energetic than others are (Luloff, 1996, 1998; Claude, Bridger and Luloff, 1999). We also sense that this 'community factor' is important to the quality of human life. Australians seem to be retreating from the anomie of the *surreal* 'global village' to embrace the comfort, feelings of significance and sense of identity provided by their *actual* socially and/or geographically localised communities. The media, community leaders and politicians are calling for the 'rejuvenation' of community in rural Australia (e.g. Cheers, 1999) as governments hurriedly introduce a plethora of policies and programs aimed at strengthening our rural communities.

But what is this 'community factor' How does it relate to rural community and individual wellbeing? What makes for a strong community? Why are 'stronger' communities more successful than others are? We are currently setting out to answer these and other related questions in a study of community strength in rural South Australia and Victoria. They have not yet been answered because this 'community factor' has not been clearly articulated in such a way that it can be defined, measured and explained. In a word, we simply don't yet know what we are talking about! The literature appears to be a somewhat vague, confused and inconsistent jumble of concepts (McDonald and Zetlin, 1999). This makes it difficult to develop effective policies and programs aimed at increasing the strength of rural communities to manage change. Nor can we test the many assumptions surrounding this community factor (e.g. that community and individual wellbeing is higher in stronger communities), work out how to strengthen communities, or investigate related issues such as the impacts of globalisation on the strength of local communities (Cheers, 1996). So we have commenced our research by revisiting some of the dominant ideas in the literature.

Prevailing Orthodoxies

Our starting point is the notion of *community capacity building* because it is such a dominant theme in Australian discourse and is close to being a self-evidently worthwhile thing to do. Current discourse tells us that what 'community capacity' is and how we should go about building it are addressed primarily through the inter-linked concepts 'social capital' and 'leadership'. Both are problematic in their application to rural communities.

The concept '*social capital*' currently dominates discussions about community issues (Woolcock, 1998; Turner 1999), so much so that a bevy of writers have attempted to incorporate community issues under the banner of social capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Putnam, 1993; Winter, 2000). Most discussions start with Putnam's (1993:167) definition, viz., "*features of social organisation such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions*". These elements - trust and certain kinds of norms and networks - are generally accepted as necessary ingredients, although they are treated differently by various authors. Those who write about social capital agree that it is something that a community 'has' or 'doesn't have' to a greater or lesser degree and that the more a community has of it the better.

Most approaches to the concept can be classified as either 'social' or 'economic'. From a 'social' angle, Cox and Caldwell (2000) see it as some kind of community 'cement' that somehow leads to community wellbeing. But, as Gamarnikov and Green (1999:10) suggest, there are two opposing views within this 'social' position. On the one hand, the 'community involvement' view embraces progressive and civic norms of co-operation, empowerment and participation. On the other hand, social capital can be interpreted in such a way as to reinforce traditional forms of power relations - i.e., that the individual should be pressured into contributing to the community and punished (if not ex-communicated) if they don't. This view underpins such policies as 'mutual obligation', 'three strikes and your out' and 'getting tough on crime'. According to Morrow (1999:760), it results in social capital joining the 'deficit theory syndrome' as yet another "*'thing' or 'resource' that unsuccessful individuals, families, communities and neighbourhoods lack*".

Economic views, on the other hand, link social capital to economic growth. For instance, Fedderke, De Kadt, and Luiz (1999) argue that social capital reduces 'transaction costs', thereby increasing productivity, which, in turn, enhances economic growth. Hogan and Owen (2000:80) contend that this "*generative or productive aspect of social capital ... qualifies it conceptually to be considered as a form of capital*". In this sense, then, social capital is just another form of capital or a 'resource' - like money, land, power, etc. - that can be used by individuals and groups to maximise their own interests. This was Portes' (1998:4) view. After reviewing the literature, Portes suggested that the emerging consensus is that "*social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other structures*". Social capital is activated as individuals use it to maximise their own personal wellbeing. It is this individualistic, utilitarian application of the concept that separates it from issues of *community* wellbeing, *community* strength and other similar concepts. This is because we can only get to such genuine community- or macro-level characteristics by rejecting the very idea of 'community' itself and adding up the separate 'wellbeings' of each member of a community according to their disparate self interests. This is hardly a concept of 'community'. Besides, adding up success at pursuing self-interest and calling it 'community wellbeing' won't work, if only because individual interests often conflict. Thus, when defined economically as a 'commodity' to be used to maximise self-interest, the construct 'social capital' is a questionable, reductionist and 'individualistic' attempt to link rational-choice economic theory to the analysis of community interaction (Flora, Sharp, Flora and Newlon, 1997; Jordana, 1999).

It is also utilitarian in that it commodifies people and the intrinsic meaning, value and significance of human interaction and community belongingness, treating them as means to other, primarily economic, ends, rather than ends in themselves. As Nyerere commented:

Development means the development of people. Roads, buildings, the increase of crop output and other things of this nature are not development; they are only tools of development. ... An increase in the number of school buildings ... [is development] ... only if the buildings can be, and are being, used to develop the minds and the understanding of the people. ... An expansion of crops is development only if these things can be sold, and the money used for other things which improve the health, comfort and understanding of the people. ... Every proposal must be judged by the criterion of whether it serves the purposes of development - and the purpose of development is the people. (Nyerere, 1968, pp.59-60)

Despite their other differences, the 'social' and 'economic' views agree that 'social capital' is a property of human relationships - in Putnam's (1993) terms, interpersonal 'trust', certain kinds of networks and particular norms. If so, the argument continues, then community development amounts to putting them in place. This is a somewhat 'impositional' approach to community development because it imposes certain conditions on those communities that don't have enough of them. In doing so, it also reifies community structures by treating them as more or less consolidated systems that are 'governed' by equally unified

normative 'systems' which can be changed by skilled leaders. The communities we are associated with have far more internal diversity, fluidity and 'openness' than this.

Social capital has become linked with a similarly individualistic view of 'leadership'. In an influential report, McKinsey and Company (1994) highlighted leadership as a key ingredient in building the capacity of rural communities to withstand the challenges of a global world, and governments have followed suit by providing substantial resources for rural leadership training. This assumes that communities are dependent on good individual leaders with particular skills and aptitudes to lead their reconstruction and thereby achieve community and individual wellbeing. However, this rather individualistic approach to community development - i.e. pointing to examples of 'leaders' in local communities and attributing economic and social 'success' and wellbeing to their individual efforts - has many problems in its application. It is simplistic in that it ignores the multiplicity of determinants of community strength, wellbeing, 'growth', 'capacity', etc., and asocial in its failure to locate 'leaders' within the total field of human interaction within their community. It is also non-contextual in that it fails to account for community dynamics and ahistorical because it ignores the history, time, narratives and place of the community. Because it is non-contextual and ahistorical, this view is also universalistic in that it proclaims universal attributes of leaders regardless of time, context and place. It also tends to treat 'non-leaders' as rather passive people whose contributions to community development are somehow 'evoked' by the 'leaders'. Furthermore, as with the concept 'social capital', individualistic leadership theories are 'impositional'. By this we mean that, whether leadership is defined as 'directing' or 'transformational' (i.e. involving people, responding to them and attracting trust and confidence), the emphasis on individual leadership assumes that community wellbeing can be achieved by manufacturing 'trust' among people and somehow getting them to adopt the right norms and establish the right networks (Bargal and Schmid 1989).

Finally, such theories are also prone to reinforce existing power relations because leaders that promote 'local' ideologies - or the dominant community myths - are also frequently promoting the existing power structures that perpetuate them, frequently for their own benefit. These myths usually have strongly embedded discourses concerning leadership and social capital. For example, women in rural communities are often excluded from powerful positions because they are allocated subordinate roles (Dempsey, 1992; Alston, 1995). Even discourses that promote specifically women's leadership styles further alienate women by homogenising them, reifying 'care' issues as feminine, diverting attention away from organisational politics and defining women as 'the other' in the community (Blackmore, 1999).

This, of course, is not to deny that people with knowledge, communication skills and access to resources have much to contribute to the wellbeing of a community. For example, in their study of some small towns in Queensland Epps and Sorrenson (1996) found a link between the quality of local leadership and economic and socio-cultural development. Effective leadership, they suggested, should include "*the attributes of knowledge, vision, synoptic thinking, flexibility, ability to motivate and generate acceptance by the community, and commitment*" (p.165). But this is a far cry from claiming that strong individual leadership is the sole, or even the main, ingredient of community 'success' and wellbeing.

If this individualistic, or 'psychological', view of leadership is flawed, then so, too, are approaches to 'leadership training' based on developing particular knowledge, skills and even personality attributes of actual or 'potential' leaders. The alternative is a sociological approach, or what has been called 'community leadership' in the literature (e.g. Brown and Nylander III, 1998). Here, leadership is viewed as a function of the community that is shared by many people, mostly through interacting with each other, rather than as a role or responsibility of a few individuals. As such, it is as much a product as a cause of community interaction. Put simply, a community 'throws up' various people to fill a variety of leadership roles and both the people and their roles are changeable over time, depending on where the community is at temporally, interactionally, culturally and geographically. In a word, a 'leader' cannot 'lead' without the community wanting them to lead and being receptive to their leadership. From this angle, 'leadership training' falls way short of the mark of developing effective leadership. It means that if we are serious about strengthening communities then we have to support not only the leaders but also the community networks without which they cannot 'lead' with resources, access to power centres outside the community and supportive government policies in a range of areas.

Finally, dominant accounts of social capital, leadership and community capacity building seem oblivious to macro changes in social and economic structures and how they are constructed at the local level. They include no reference to the way that social structures are built upon, and shaped by, ever-evolving

community narratives. Romantic versions of social capital and leadership only help to serve neo-liberal, economic-rationalist political agendas, and their individualism does little for the analysis of community strength and wellbeing.

In sum, what we seem to need is an angle on the 'community factor' that:

1. focuses squarely on the community without reducing it to individual-level variables;
2. does not reify community processes, such as norms and networks, into holistic, unified structures or systems;
3. acknowledges that communities exist in time, have a history and find continuity in community narratives;
4. recognises the importance of community interaction;
5. defines the factor (community capacity, social capital or whatever) by what people in a community are doing rather than some resource that a community 'has';
6. recognises the intrinsic value, meaning and significance of human interaction in the community as an end in its own right; and
7. is embedded in an empirically based, reasonably coherent set of theoretical propositions that defines, operationalises and explains the community factor.

Community Strength from the Angle of Community Interaction Theory

Community interaction theory (Wilkinson, 1991) provides another way of thinking about the community factor in 'communities of place'. It suggests that these are characterised by four components: *locality*; *local society*; processes of collective, locality-oriented actions called the *community field* (Wilkinson, 1970, 1991; see also Hillery, 1955; Kaufman, 1959; Luloff, 1998; Luloff and Swanson, 1995; Wilkinson, 1998); and interaction with the wider society (or *vertical ties*). The *locality* is the space in which people live - the particular geographic territory demarcated by locally agreed upon boundaries. Community boundaries are dynamic in that they are created, and continually recreated, through the interactions and perceptions of local people as they go about their daily lives. But locality is only the starting point of the analysis, as once it is located the emphasis shifts from a focus on territory to a focus on the social life of the people (Wilkinson, 1991).

The *local society* comprises the organisation of social institutions and associations in the social life of a locality. It is:

"a comprehensive network of associations for meeting common needs and expressing common interests ... the organization of social institutions and associations in the social life of the local population" (Wilkinson, 1991:27).

It is arranged, for example, into organisations and their interrelationships, kinship systems, socioeconomic classes, normative systems and various groupings based on culture, ethnicity, gender and occupation. The local society gives the territory its social meaning. It is inevitable, a 'natural' product of human co-existence as people who share a locality go about meeting their daily needs in an interdependent way. It is comprehensive in that it is based on local actions and interactions, and 'open' because history, external forces, personalities, and chance contribute to its ongoing fluidity and unpredictability. A local society is marked by the presence of several more or less distinct *social fields* through which people and organisations pursue specific interests. A social field is a dynamic, constantly changing, loosely bounded sequence of acts displaying coherence through time around an identifiable set of interests (Wilkinson, 1991:88). It comprises actors, associations and activities and is marked to a greater or lesser extent by its own identity, frame of reference, and organisation. Social fields are not necessarily entirely locally oriented, as many incorporate extra-local activities. They are found in a variety of arenas. In the political arena, for instance, members of the power elite frequently act in ways to preserve their collective power base. Similarly, in economic development circles, private entrepreneurs form associations to maximise profit (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982), whilst in the social care arena people work through human service organisations to help others, identify social needs and promote social services (Cheers, 1998). The fields, and typical associated field-specific structures, that are most relevant to managing regional change in Australia include:

- the economy - economic development boards;
- infrastructure - local government;
- education - parents and citizens associations;
- health care - hospital boards;
- social care - councils for social development;

- ecology - Landcare groups;
- religion – churches; and
- recreation - sporting clubs.

But a local society is not a community unless it has a *community field* that reflects community interaction across and between these special-interest fields (Wilkinson, 1991:35-37). A place is a community to the extent that members act intentionally in the interests of the whole community, regardless of whether these actions are taken at the individual, group and/or organisational level (Luloff, 1998). The community field emerges as people find common ground where they express their common interests in, and commitment to, their locality through numerous interrelated actions. *The community field, then, comprises all those acts which contribute to the interests of the community as a whole by interlinking and coordinating the other social fields and harnessing their information, experience, resources, and energy for the common good.* Thus, the community field comprises dynamic processes of human interaction and, as such, is comprehensive, fluid and open (Wilkinson, 1991:35-36). This is in contrast to the notion of social capital, which tends to treat a community and its components as organic wholes. By treating a community as a set of overlapping fields, rather than as a 'system', interaction theory keeps the idea of 'community' intact as a genuine macro-level construct without either reducing it to individual micro-level variables, such as maximisation of self-interest, or reifying it and its components as organic 'systems'.

Typical organisational structures in the community field include local government, community development associations and community councils in indigenous communities. A community field enables *community actions*, which channel people's shared, underlying interest in, and commitment to, the local society (Wilkinson, 1991:90; Bridger and Luloff, 1998:118-119). These express the capacity of residents to work together for the wellbeing of the entire community, rather than special interests. Those actions that are purposive are acts of *community agency* (Luloff, 1998:13-14). Community agency occurs, for instance, when a chamber of commerce, a social development committee, and a human rights group come together to improve the living conditions of the entire community, not just those of their respective constituencies. Although such acts characterise the community field, they may also occur in other social fields. Research has shown that community agency tends to be episodic in nature (Luloff, 1990), intensifying in response to particular issues, problems and challenges, especially perceived crises (Luloff, 1990; Tilly, 1973). Because the community field arises out of cooperative actions undertaken to deal with local issues it tends to be structured to respond to the challenges posed by change and usually generates positive aspects of community wellbeing, such as community attachment and solidarity (Wilkinson, 1991). Thus, 'community' is a matter of degree rather than an 'all-or-nothing' thing, and it varies across communities and within the same community through time (Cheers, 1998:67-68).

No community exists in isolation. A community must inevitably interact with the wider society through *vertical links* with external structures (Warren, 1978). These are in contrast to the *horizontal* links among local people and organisations. Positive as they may be, the strong ties that bond together local interactions can also limit the acceptance of 'outsiders', increase pressures for local conformity, restrict entrepreneurial activity, limit access to external resources and power centres, and encourage closure against the extra-local social and political environment (Granovetter, 1973). On the other hand, the presence of weaker vertical ties, such as formal and transitory contacts with relative strangers and periodic interaction with external organisations, extends the community's networks and, through these, its access to information, resources and power (Cheers, 1998).

From an interactional perspective, then, community 'strength' is the strength of the community field - or, operationally, the extent to which community agency is happening in a local society. This includes a number of dimensions, such as the frequency of community acts, the number of people, organisations and other structures doing them, and so on. From this point of view, 'social capital' is how much community agency is going on in a community. This is the 'resource', the 'capital' - there is no other. It is what people are doing, rather than something they can use for other ends. While there might be some value in distinguishing between *actual* and *latent potential* community agency the latter is probably not community agency at all, but the community structures and processes that provide the conditions for it to occur.

Rather than focusing on building the capacity of a community to do certain things, community interaction theory focuses on facilitating the doing of it through community development. From this perspective, rural community development involves building, developing and promoting the community field – strengthening interlinking processes and structures, intensifying community agency, and increasing the frequency of community actions and interactions in other social fields (Luloff and

Wilkinson, 1990; Wilkinson, 1998:87-88; Cheers and Luloff, in press). It occurs as members of various social fields interact with one another on projects and issues that transect interest lines (Claude, Bridger and Luloff, 1999). Such linkages are critical in that they help transform the focus from interest-specific concerns to those of the larger whole, consequently contributing to the improvement of the general quality of life of local citizens.

As with community agency, community development tends to be episodic in nature and focused on specific issues, primarily in response to perceived threats to, or crises within, the community. It also typically occurs through specific projects, such as establishing a youth centre (Cheers, 1998:132-133). Nevertheless, *the defining characteristic of community development is people trying to enhance community* - not whether a particular project is the best way to go or how successful it is (Cheers and Luloff, in press). Whether, for example, a given community should establish a hostel for aged people or, alternatively, strengthen home-support services is not the point. Community development occurs to the extent that a generalised set of people is participating in decision making, regardless of the issue at hand. Without such action, community structures tend to become rigid and unresponsive to new and emerging issues, while, through it, they are strengthened, negotiated and renewed.

Community development can occur through whole-community planning or specific projects in particular social fields. In community planning, people and organisations from various fields typically come together through community-field structures to generate shared goals for the community, operationalise these through concrete projects and strategies, obtain resources for particular projects, and implement them (Garkovich, 1981; Rudel, 1989; Luloff, 1990; Cheers, 1998:131-142). For instance, through local government, the chamber of commerce, the social development committee, the residents and ratepayers association, locally based government departments and non-government human service organisations might come together to develop a broad, integrated plan for the region. Field-specific projects contribute to more broadly based community development when they involve, as they usually do, coordination with, and input from other fields in the form of information, support (monetary and labour), political lobbying, and resources. For instance, devising strategies to meet youth needs typically involves interaction amongst welfare organisations, business and education organisations, and young people themselves.

Because community development occurs in both the community field and other special-interest fields it cannot be allocated to one, or even a small number, of people, groups, or organisations. It also happens in a myriad of forms, not according to prescribed formulae. In this way, community interaction theory views leadership as a range of community development functions shared throughout the community, and community prosperity as the result of interaction involving many participants rather than the achievement of a few highly skilled and well resourced individual 'leaders'.

Community Interaction Theory and The Community Factor

We suggested earlier that current orthodoxies concerning the community factor have some problems in their application to rural communities. Community interaction theory does not appear to have these because it:

1. is a theory of human interaction which, after all, is what a community is;
2. focuses squarely on the community level of analysis without reducing it to individual characteristics, qualities, capacities, behaviours and/or interests;
3. recognises that communities exist in time, have a history and maintain continuity through community narratives;
4. defines community strength in terms of what people are doing;
5. defines a community and its fields as 'open', fluid and flexible, without reifying the community and its structures and processes as organic wholes or more or less unitary systems;
6. recognises the intrinsic value, meaning and significance of community living to its members; and
7. is embedded in an empirically based, reasonably coherent set of theoretical propositions that defines and operationalises the community factor.

From this angle, then, community strength is a genuine macro-level variable, not a static thing or resource that inheres in individuals or exists somewhere in the communal ether. It is genuinely about development *of* the community rather than development *in* the community (Wilkinson 1991:94). Its dynamism is to be found in specific aspects of the process: awareness, initiation, innovation,

development, selection, maintenance and regeneration. Each of these presupposes a community field that can boast some important interactions around information, communication and management, and sufficient resources to 'develop'. Information interactions are not the individual traits of specific leaders but those that give the community as a whole the relevant technical and strategic knowledge. The power of the community field is strengthened when knowledge becomes a key civic resource that promotes an active citizenship. This is reinforced where communication and interaction patterns are well developed. Interest and participation in community and civic affairs improves communication that can lead to more tolerance and respect for others. Finally, management interactions include the capacities to focus on negotiation and mediation as well as vitalising the community. However, strengthening communities cannot be left to communities alone; they do not act in isolation. It is crucial that a supportive political, cultural, economic and social context is provided in which government policies, programs, funding strategies, technology and incentives, among other things, all play a role.

Conclusion

Theoretically, community strength is a dynamic construct that should produce community wellbeing in an iterative manner through human interaction, not through certain norms, networks and trust being imposed on, or even facilitated in, a community by a few individual leaders. While more research is certainly needed, existing studies confirm a direct, positive relationship between community strength, operationalised as community agency, and community wellbeing at both the macro and micro levels (Martinez-Brawley, 1990; Wilkinson, 1991:77-81; Cheers, 1998:75-80). For instance, a strong community field has been shown to be positively associated with economic growth (Luloff, 1998), social-emotional aspects of community wellbeing such as community attachment, cohesion and solidarity (Wilkinson, 1991), and successful resolution of local social problems (Luloff, 1996; Claude, Bridger, and Luloff, 1999). Furthermore, Luloff (1998) has demonstrated that places experiencing decline typically have lower rates of citizen involvement than those dominated by pressures toward growth and development.

The vision of strong rural communities in Australia remains misty and, consequently, achieving it is largely a matter of chance. To get beyond this point, we urgently require research focused on community-level variables. We need to define, operationalise, identify the dimensions of, and find ways of measuring community strength. We also need to identify the factors contributing to it, and investigate its relationships with community wellbeing and community resilience at both macro and micro levels. Research has demonstrated that a strong and active community field contributes to community wellbeing, but we don't yet know how it is produced. This is what we are setting out to do in our research. We are just starting on the journey of empirically investigating these questions. What we do know at the outset, however, is that community development, in the context of broader, integrated regional development strategies, and supported by government policy and resources, has much to contribute to actualising the many potentialities of rural communities.

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