

What Is a Community?

*Communities are focal points
for providing services—
including that of
education.*

EXCEPT for obvious differences in size, the untrained observer sees in American communities a rather monotonous similarity. In general he sees a lot of people scurrying around, going about their business with little consciousness of what others are doing or how their activities relate to the larger whole. On the surface it appears that there is very little organization or integration in what these people are doing.

One also sees in communities a set of spatial relationships with some uniqueness in detail but at the same time resembling other communities in general ecological pattern. In the smaller towns one is most aware of the main street with its single concentrated business section; its radial side streets; its green landscape dotted by church spires and dominated by its most imposing edifice—the school building.

In cities, too, one is aware of an eco-

logical pattern providing some uniqueness in land utilization but at the same time depicting a spatial structure in which resemblances may be noted when cities are compared. Most cities have business, industrial and residential areas with various types of transitional zones found adjacent to the central business district. The transitional zone is one of residential deterioration with submerged regions of poverty, degradation and disease, often housing colonies of recent immigrants and low resource ethnics. Moving from the center to the periphery of the city the quality of the individual housing units increases.

Despite these evidences of seeming confusion and surface similarity, there is an organization and systematic integration of activities so as to meet the needs of individuals and groups in the community. These people are hurrying about, making a living, guiding the young, buying food and commodities, making payments on houses, cars and appliances, worshipping, voting and enjoying leisure. Communities are focal

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points for providing comprehensive services to people in a trading area.

There are variations in the patterns of community activities, area supports and service functions but the social relations of communities everywhere are characterized by the common interests and activities of the geographic area. If the geographic base is homogeneous, as in much of the Midwest, the spacing of towns and cities is quite even. In areas of uneven resource distribution, the distribution of cities is uneven.

Meaning of Community

The term community has been employed in so many ways that it is coming to have little specific connotation. To some writers, community is a *Gemeinschaft* in which there is a commonality of values in a particular spatial location. To others the term community refers to a group of differentiated aggregates which have in common only the land occupied by the aggregates. Some writers will use the term only when modified by a descriptive term such as "trade-center community" or "suburban community" or "ecological community."

The community is to be distinguished from such groupings as the neighborhood, the fringe settlement and society. The neighborhood is a small area of primary contacts and personal relationships within a community. The fringe settlement is an amorphous grouping of people outside the city limits. The concept, society, refers to a vast complex of interrelations differentiated into systems all of which affect the whole. We speak of American society as a large pattern of relationships which in totality have a unity.

While society is an abstract term, the community is a concrete geographic

unit in which the residents carry on a common mode of life. A distillation of the literature on communities reveals approximately the following characteristics:

1. A population aggregate
2. A geographically defined area
3. A common mode of life
4. A group of needs-serving agencies
5. A sense of identity and involvement
6. A social heritage
7. A functional interdependence.

These are the basic prerequisites of a community. These are the necessary conditions for defining the community as a concrete social reality. Further detail on each of these characteristics follows:

1. A population aggregate

The first and most obvious characteristic of a community is that it is a group of people large enough to be thought of as a community. These people can be counted and classified by such variables as birth and death rates, sex, age, occupation, religion, educational attainment and the like. Growth trends can be noted and it is highly significant to know whether total numbers are in decline or on the increase. Size alone is an important factor in understanding the way of life in any community. The life-style, the problems, the ethos of a small *Gemeinschaft* type of town certainly are quite different from the larger *Gesellschaft* type of community in which secondary contacts prevail.

2. A geographically defined area

The community has a spatial location. It is a parcel of land which has a rim and a center with roads, streets and avenues connecting all of its parts. The way of life is affected by its geographic features—the climate, the topography, the soil, bodies of water and other natural features. In defining a community, it is not always clear as to the precise loca-

tion of the boundary lines. This detail is of greater importance to administrators than it is to the citizen or the student who is primarily concerned with the mode of life contained in the community.

The attempt to give precision to the boundary lines of a community will have to be based on social purposes. No single delimitation is appropriate for all purposes. There are many ways of considering a community. It can be viewed and delimited from the standpoint of a trading center, a zoning area, newspaper circulation, a school board, a police district, a township, a general taxation area, an ecological area, etc. The sociological community represents a combination of many segments and its borders are defined according to broader purposes of the activity or inquiry relative to the community.

3. *A common mode of life*

This component of community life is not concerned with details of the pattern but in the life activities of the community. The categories used in the Middletown studies may be useful here: making a living, family life, training the young, spending leisure, getting information, worshiping, voting, keeping well, community action and the like. These are activities engaged in by the people of the community with considerable variation in detail according to such factors as age, social class and sex. There are other variations of detail in reference to the size of the community, its geographic location and its occupational functions. Yet there is a consistency sufficient to regard the community as a subculture with its own organization of social norms and practices.

4. *A group of needs-serving agencies*

Unlike a neighborhood or urban fringe area, a community is a place where all

of one's living needs can be met by a group of institutions or needs-serving agencies. Kingsley Davis has referred to this as "social completeness."¹ It is the smallest territorial unit that can embrace all aspects of social life. It is a society in miniature which contains the major institutions, the various statuses and interest groups which make up a society. Though it is an unlikely possibility, an individual could live his entire life within the confines of the community since there is a variety of agencies and institutions to meet the wide array of needs.

5. *A sense of identity and involvement*

Another characteristic of community is the identification and involvement people feel about their town. This is the we-feeling people develop for their place of residence. It is the reaction which causes people to make reference to "our town" and is characterized by the expression "we believe." In this sense of identity, people develop feelings of solidarity, of loyalty, of friendliness and cooperation. Under this impulse we feel at home and we are familiar with the ways of thinking and acting of the people around us. When crisis emerges there is a sense of obligation to meet the threat lest there be an eventual eclipse of the community.

6. *A social heritage*

Closely related to the matter of identity is the realization in the community that there is a social heritage, an accumulated culture and a historical past. The older residents tell and retell the community folk tales with a good deal of relish. The "I remember when" prelude to a story is a common approach known to many of us. Much of it may be legend. Some of it may be fact, but these tales constitute much of the lore and sacred beliefs of

¹ Kingsley Davis. *Human Society*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949. p. 310-13.

the community. The more careful student of community and society will see in every community the processes by which the cultural traits are transmitted and combined into the culture pattern which characterizes the contemporary community.

7. *A functional interdependence*

A community is an organization of highly interrelated and interdependent activities. The breakdown of any major facet of community life has profound effect on the community as a whole. For example, a strike, a school riot, a bank failure, a business failure, a natural disaster such as a flood or tornado, all of these have a significant impact on the other agencies or the people of the community. All communities depend on a complex web of interrelated norms. Community life could not exist without them.

Understanding the Community

In addition to knowing the characteristics of communities, in order to understand the community concept it is important to know something about community types, the value system and the power structure. Actually, there is no widely accepted system of classification into types. One of the most obvious differences in communities is that of size and there are many arbitrary classifications. Our purposes may be served by the following: the village, 250 to 1,000 population; the town, 1,000 to 10,000; the small city, 10,000 to 50,000; the medium city, 50,000 to 250,000; the large city, 250,000 to 1,000,000; and the metropolis, 1,000,000 and over.²

² These categories do not correspond with the standards used by U.S. census which uses the arbitrary figure of 2,500 to distinguish between rural and urban and 100,000 as a population aggregate to be designated as standard metropolitan areas.

While size is a most significant determinant for social relationships and community structure, there are other variables by which classification could be made such as location, major function, dominant occupation, or social composition. When thought of in terms of major service function the following categories may be noted: rural trade center, residential suburb, resort, mining, manufacturing, government and college towns. All of these community types differ from each other and provide for their people a unique social system and way of life.

Of peculiar importance to school people is the value system and power structure of the community. Teachers and administrators must understand the mores, traditions and customs of a community if they are to avoid the mistakes which antagonize a community because its sacred codes have been violated.

By value system we mean the hierarchy of objects or situations to which relative degrees of worth have been attached. Values are the things which the community considers good. Every community reflects the basic American values plus its own unique arrangement. Basic American values would include such things as: achievement and success, efficiency, progress, material comfort, bigness, hard work, freedom, etc.³ The value hierarchy of the immediate community provides additional situations which are sacred to the community. For example a religiously oriented community would provide a set of ethical norms, somewhat unlike that of a university community which stresses academic achievement or an industrial community which would place high value on technological skills. Life goals and values in these different

³ For more detailed discussion of American values see Robin Williams, *American Society*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952, Chap. 11.

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communities have different effects on growing personalities.

Every community has a power system with an arrangement of various types and degrees of authority. Power refers to the ability or authority to compel action. In every community there are people who possess the power to make decisions and enforce them. Communities at all times face the problems of power, its location, its uses and abuses. Much of the power of the community is in the industrial and economically strong groups and in the formal governmental institutions.

Public school people particularly need to know of the community power system since the support of the power groups is necessary for the support of the school.

School and Community

As mass education developed there was an increasing awareness that the school and the community bear vital relationships to each other. When schooling was for the intellectually elite there was little need for community centered education. Compulsory school attendance laws brought masses of youngsters to the schools most of whom did not relate their attendance to college preparation. Educators developed a concern for life-centered education knowing that preparation for college is not enough since a

relatively small number of secondary school graduates go on to college.

The school is seen as an integral part of the community, sharing in its objectives and responding to community needs and pressures. At the same time the community reacts to the influences exercised by the school. With the school and community bearing such vital relationships to each other, it is a logical development in educational leadership to provide a social orientation to the educational process. It is recognized that community study, understanding and participation are prerequisites for effective participation in the individual's role as citizen in his community and in his society. The community is the child's locus of past, present and future activity. This is the immediate world, this is the concrete reality, this is the effective environment to which the child must make his adjustments.

We suggest eight ways by which schools can develop a community approach to education:

1. Evolve a program based on the needs and interests of people in the community
2. Provide and develop leadership for servicing community needs
3. Build a curriculum around the major processes of community living
4. Provide the facilities for community forums, recreation, adult education and other activities of a community nature
5. Utilize community resources in every phase of the school program
6. Engage in continuous research and study of the community so that its problems can be located and identified
7. Serve as a repository of community information
8. Serve as an agency of coordination in the community's educational efforts.

These points represent a notion of education which regards the educational process as a community-wide function.

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