

Essay on Community

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Family and community are human organisms that are the bedrock of any society. They provide the sustenance, values, direction, and protection that make it possible for individuals who live in a defined location to prosper and thrive singularly and collectively. Community is the social structure that mediates between the individual resident and the state and private elites, guiding social transactions between these different worlds to advance and protect the interests and needs of individuals and groups within neighborhoods or local communities.

Like any other social system, a community is an interdependent network of component parts or sub-systems. Consequently, a change in one component has an impact on all others that make up the whole. All of the forces and energies flowing in a community come to rest at a state of equilibrium, a dynamic balance that works to maintain its stasis, particularly when challenged by internal and external change forces. The sociologist Kurt Lewin taught that if a change in a community is not frozen or institutionalized, the previous conditions will be re-established.

All communities or neighborhoods have horizontal ties and vertical ties. Horizontal ties are the relationships between and among community institutions and leaders. Vertical ties are the relationships between community institutions and leaders with powerful institutions and leaders in the extra-community. Viable communities keep these ties in balance because without strong ties in each direction the community is in danger of being exploited and/or under-resourced. Urban ghettos and barrios are communities where the vertical ties are usually much stronger than their horizontal ties. Its leaders and institutions fail to collaborate and bond in the interest of the greater good of the community. They seek to survive and thrive by acquiring resources from the extra-community and not by focusing on harnessing the resources and assets within the community. Consequently, the community lives in a state of economic and political disempowerment.

The community action programs, embodied in the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and Model Cities, were ushered in to reverse the disempowerment of poor and racially isolated communities in cities and rural

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areas. These programs sought to create a major shift in perspective, practices, image, and language in the corridors of governmental power and ideally in the civic life of municipalities. The federal government was emboldened to provide greater opportunities in employment, education, and social services, but more importantly, to give some power to the poor to decide on the distribution and management of these new resources.

Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, the noted African American social psychologist, presented a searing quantitative and qualitative portrait of Harlem in 1965 in his powerful book, *Dark Ghetto*. In it he said: “The dark ghetto’s invisible walls have been erected by the white society, by those who have power, both to confine those who have *no* power and to perpetuate their powerlessness. The dark ghettos are social, political, educational, and — above all — economic colonies. Their inhabitants are subject peoples, victims of greed, cruelty, insensitivity, guilt and fear of their masters.”

In the late 1950s James R. Conant, president of Harvard University, weighed in with his book, *The Slums*, which portrayed the degradation and hopelessness in poor urban communities. In the early 1960s the Ford Foundation dubbed these communities “gray areas” and mounted large scale demonstration programs in American cities to ameliorate the conditions of social and physical blight that plagued them.

In the wake of tough and critical social commentary, the language and practice of “empowerment” were born. The OEO mandate for “maximum feasible participation” of the intended beneficiaries of community action programs epitomized the new governmental posture. Its vision was to assist residents in disempowered communities to move beyond victimhood by being involved in the planning, distribution, and oversight of new programs in their communities. These programs sought to build new structures that strengthened the horizontal ties between community institutions and their leaders and to reverse years of counterproductive competition. Although community action programs did not always live up to their responsibilities and mandates, they did spawn a generation of new service institutions and political leaders who moved disempowered communities to a better place. Many of these institutions are still active today.

The lessons learned inform our understanding today of what characteristics are required to create and sustain viable communities. First, the boundaries of communities and neighborhoods must be permeable, able to absorb newcomers who are brought into the opportunity systems and cultural life of the community. The new diversity of neighborhoods must be used as an asset, not viewed as a problem. Second, a community must have the capacity to protect its residents from any form of *real* physical and psychological harm. Third, a strong institutional infrastructure, strengthened by collaborative work, is essential to provide for the needs of individual residents and groups. Fourth, community residents and their leaders must be able to anticipate social and

economic trends in order to do proactive planning to exploit opportunities and avoid negative impacts, and therefore, not be disadvantaged by external planning bodies. Fifth, residents must be anchored in the culture, rituals, and traditions of the community. Sixth, young people must be involved in the organizational life of the community or they will be adrift, causing trouble. Seventh, providing quality education and job opportunities for children and youth is the highest responsibility for community leadership, if healthy generational legacy is to be secured. And finally, an empowered community must have a strong voting electorate to have effective transactions with leaders outside the community.

Throughout the ages we have learned that human beings choose to live in small and large localities in close proximity to each other and close to essential human and material resources. This clustering phenomenon confirms a profound human need for connection to others and interdependent living. Although the United States is a vast landscape, over 90 percent of our population lives on less than 10 percent of the land. Almost 40 percent of Americans live in our major cities. In short, we are in each other's physical and social space, struggling to dismantle barriers of all kinds so that we can be truly connected. We have the power to organize ourselves so that there is a fairer and most just sharing of the abundance in our midst, so we can achieve that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called, "the beloved community." Like it or not, we are interdependent peoples. In words from a famous Leadbelly folk song, "We are all in the same boat, brother, you can't rock one end without rocking the other." ❁