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Number 7. Community cohesion: constructing boundaries between or within communities-of-place?

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Community cohesion: constructing boundaries between or within communities-of-place?

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with how communities are constructed symbolically and the relation between such symbolically constructed communities and communities-of-place. Analysis of literature on the symbolic construction of Scottish communities shows that the boundaries of these communities do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries of the geographically defined community-of-place. People identify, and are identified, with more than one community, and such identification is temporary in character. Which community is identified with is dependent on the specific time, place, group of people and activities engaged in.

Community cohesion: constructing boundaries between or within communities-of-place?

The importance of community cohesion

The intention of this paper is to explore how communities are constructed symbolically and the relation between such symbolically constructed communities and the cohesion of communities-of-place. To what extent do inhabitants of a geographically defined locality experience a sense of community? This exploration is based upon an analysis of literature on community in rural Scotland. But before doing so, my approach to community cohesion taken in this paper will be introduced briefly.

Different understandings of community cohesion

The first part of the term community cohesion, community, usually refers to a collectivity or group while cohesion usually addresses the characteristics (and the strength in particular) of the bonds between the individuals who constitute that collectivity or group. The social sciences have approached the study of the bonds between individuals who constitute a collectivity or group in at least two different ways. Early sociologists and anthropologists have emphasized the form and function of communities while taking the sheer existence of such communities for granted. The review of community cohesion by Friedkin (2004), for example, takes such an approach. From a social psychology perspective Friedkin studies the attitudes and behaviour of individuals towards a group. Other studies adopt the social capital vocabulary to measure the intensity of the relationships between inhabitants of neighbourhoods (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Stafford et al, 2003) assuming that rural neighbourhoods by definition constitute a community-of-place.

In the 1980s, the anthropologist Cohen (1985) criticized the above approach to community for its emphasis on form rather than content. For him, community is a symbol which is imprecise and therefore malleable in nature. The symbol that forms the basis for identification as a group may in fact bear different meanings for people who identify with that symbol. The strength of a symbol is however derived from the fact that it is defined in such a way that it enables those people who identify with it to distinguish themselves from others. Cohen therefore argues for the study of symbolically constructed boundaries. Understanding community as a symbol rather

than a specific form and/or function thus redirects our attention away from indicators of degrees of cohesiveness to the characteristics of the boundaries through which a certain group of people distinguishes itself from others, and as a consequence experiences a sense of community. This approach has informed ethnographic studies in particular. Kohn (2002), for example, compares two ways in which in-migrants in rural communities try to become accepted by those who are already accepted as part of the community. Butler (2003: 2469) studies the mechanisms through which London middle classes share a common relationship which is 'largely exclusive of those who are not 'people like us''. Many studies of community cohesion which start from the understanding of community as a symbol, however, refrain from using the term community cohesion. Instead, these studies tend to emphasize identification.

The idea of symbolically constructed communities is still highly influential. In the last decade, however, it has been acknowledged that people in their everyday lives do not identify with one community only, but with many communities. This is often understood in terms of multiple identities. In addition, this identification is argued to have become fluid. 'High levels of personal mobility fracture the maintenance of relationships with fixed communities and favour the formation of 'new' groups of people with similar fluid characteristics' (Findlay et al, 2004).

The acknowledgement of identification as being fluid and with many different communities at the same time problematizes our study of community cohesion. Identification is no longer perceived as a stable phenomenon, but rather as something that is temporary or recurrent. In addition, people are likely to identify with many different symbolically constructed communities in the course of their everyday lives. Which community is identified with at a certain moment in time is likely to be dependent on the specific situation in terms of time, place, people involved with and practices involved in. Identification is thus a contextual phenomenon. The question of whether inhabitants of a certain geographical locality all identify with each other, or whether the those who identify themselves as inhabitants of the locality employ a more narrow definition to the exclusion of some inhabitants of the locality, thus needs to be seen in a similar contextual setting, in which there is the possibility that on the one moment people employ a more inclusive symbol, whereas later a less inclusive symbol is addressed.

Rural Scotland: boundaries between and within communities-of-place

In order to illustrate the above-sketched approach to community cohesion, literature on rural communities in Scotland will be analysed briefly. This section looks at how communities are constructed symbolically and the rigidness of boundaries in particular.

There is a vast literature that addresses how rural communities in Scotland construct boundaries around themselves (e.g. Jedrej and Nuttall, 1996; Jamieson, 2000; Kohn, 2002). Through history the population in Scottish rural settlements has been continuously changing. In many parts of Scotland the maximum population in the countryside was reached around the 1850s (Jedrej and Nuttall, 1996). Agricultural development invoked labour surplus and labourers were pulled to towns and cities where the manufacturing industries were booming. Changing views of the rural, however, have invoked a process of repopulation of many rural areas from the city (Jamieson, 2000). Unevenly spread over Scotland, accessible rural areas and the West coast being most popular by in-migrants, this process of repopulation often hides the continuing out-migration of young people from rural areas (Stockdale, 2002). The combination of in-and out-migration leaves many remote rural areas with an ageing population, while accessible rural areas become urban dormitories where in daytime almost all inhabitants move to towns and cities nearby.

The migration of urban people into rural Scotland has resulted in two related concerns. On the one hand it is argued that in-migrants induced an increase in the prices of houses in rural areas. Many in-migrants come from urban areas in England where house prices are higher. Selling their houses, they earn a lot of money that they subsequently invest in a house in rural Scotland, causing an increase in house prices over there. In-migrants thus outcompete first-time buyers from rural areas on their local housing market in particular.

The other concern often expressed in relation to the in-migration of people in rural areas is understood by Jedrej and Nuttall (1996) as the 'White Settler debate'. In the 1990s overt anti-English organisations such as 'Settler Watch' and 'Scottish Watch' emerged, voicing a general concern about the 'Englishing of Scotland' (Jedrej and

Nutall, 1996:3). The 'White Settler debate' in part was a direct result of the in-migration of English-born people into many rural areas of Scotland outcompeting Scottish rural people on the housing market. Together, these two concerns point at need to view the study of community cohesion in its historical, political and socio-economic context.

Both the housing debate and the White Settler debate led to a reinforcement of ideas of 'us against them'. In order to reinforce their own identity, people born and raised in rural Scotland have called themselves rural so as to distinguish themselves from urban dwellers, they have called themselves locals to distinguish themselves from incomers, and they have thought of themselves as Scottish, to distinguish themselves from the English that come to Scotland. These distinctions have been expressed in Scotland in general, in the context of rural localities, and in the context of contacts between smaller groups or individuals. In constructing these symbolic boundaries, the labels (symbols) used are imprecise. By calling all in-migrants 'English', it is neglected that many in-migrants in fact are not English-born.

Many of the studies of in-migration in Scotland have pointed at the dialectical nature of identification (Jenkins, 2004). The way in which people identify themselves is closely related to how they are identified by others. In the following quote we have an example of the importance of identification by others:

> '… it's kind of like, 'we hate the English except for you cos you're our pal' kind of thing. So you know when people get to know you personally they don't sort of, you know they don't put you in with all the rest of the English, it's there but it doesn't involve the personality of the individual. (male, 43)' (McIntosh et al, 2004: 50)

In the above quote the contextual nature of identification becomes clear. The male interviewee is identified as English and as a friend (pal). For his friends the identification as a friend is more important than the identification as being English. When the interviewee is identified as a friend the interviewee is accepted as a member of the group of friends. When the interviewee is identified as being English he is excluded. The interviewee thus is identified in multiple ways. Likewise, it is likely that the boundaries around the community in a geographically bounded locality is

contextual. The specific moment in time, the place where people are, the people they are with, and the activities they are engaged in, are all likely to influence the specific symbol employed in the construction of community at that moment. Broadly speaking, two different grounds for identification can be distinguished. Consider the following quotes:

> 'You have to be a Hawicky. You have to speak broad Hawick and enjoy going out and getting wrecked every weekend and going to certain pubs and that to fit in, in Hawick. And if you don't, if you don't wear what's fashionable and speak the way Hawick people speak and do the things, work on the mill, you don't seem to fit in.' (Jamieson, 2000: 214)

> 'I'm not from [home town] … I'm from Edinburgh as far as I'm concerned. That's where I was born. That's where I lived for five years or so. I wouldn't want to be somebody from [home town] anyway. I'm proud of the fact that I wasn't born here.' (Jamieson, 2000: 215)

From the first quote it emerges that what people do actually defines whether they are considered part of the community. In contrast, in the second quote the contingencies of birth are more important. This distinction runs parallel with the distinction between acquired and ascribed identity (Jenkins, 2004). Acceptance as part of the community on basis of acquired identity can be achieved through practices and is thus subject to change over time if the individual wants. Acceptance on basis of ascribed identity tends to be all-or-nothing, and usually does not change over time. In the context of community cohesion, the question is whether the boundary around the community is determined on basis of what people do, or on basis of the contingencies of birth.

What does this imply for our study of community cohesion? From the above it can be learnt that in many cases the boundaries between 'us and them' are constructed on basis of the contingencies of birth. These symbolically constructed boundaries can cross straight through the geographical boundaries of localities. But the question we should ask is about the relative importance of this boundary in comparison to the importance of the boundary constructed on basis of the geographical locality as opposed to other such localities.

It could be expected, however, that the intensity of identification with the community on basis of a specific locality differs for people born and raised in the locality and in-

migrants. Since people born and raised in the locality are likely to have lived longer in the locality than in-migrants, the identification with the community based on the specific locality of the former is therefore likely to be more intense and stable over time than such identification by in-migrants. The housing debate mirrors these different degrees of fluidity. It is likely that people who originate from the locality experience the fact that they are outcompeted on the local housing market as particularly painful since they are the ones who have strong bonds with the community in that locality, while in-migrants might well move on after a few years. In such way, the bond between local inhabitants is likely to become less cohesive over time.

Conclusion

This paper points to the need to study the relative importance of identification with the community-of-place as compared to other constructions of community that are important in the physical locality. This involves the study of which constructions are most important in the locality and how they relate to each other in degrees of importance. If we understand where the boundaries are placed between 'us and them' in rural localities, we will understand the mechanisms for inclusion and exclusion. It is likely that these boundaries for inclusion and exclusion also influence the interaction between individual inhabitants of a locality. As we have seen from one of the quotes in the previous section: inclusion in social interaction is dependent on whether one is identified as a member of the same community or not. Trust is more easily established between those who identify with the same group than between people who identify with different groups in society. The study of the symbolic construction of communities thus gives rise to revealing insights in the form and functioning of communities.

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