

Groups Change but Community Stays the Same

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UNST 220: Understanding Communities

16 February 2006

Can a single group define the term *community*? The presence of basic qualities such as trust and cooperation provides a definition for community which will remain relevant in a changing world. Specific group structures such as a village or a bowling league will eventually become dated. Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist, and Robert D. Putnam, a Harvard professor, both wrote about the loss of trust and cooperation to individualism. These men based their views on specific group structures that people found increasingly irrelevant. This paper will look at why the definition of community should focus on the qualities of trust and cooperation instead of specific group structures by showing, through Tönnies's and Putnam's writings, how groups have changed but still provide some form of trust and cooperation.

Tönnies, in *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*, illustrated his views of community, *Gemeinschaft*, by describing a group of interdependent people united by land, family, and beliefs who find satisfaction through simply being contributing group members. He based the basic structure of this group on his views of a somewhat isolated, nineteenth-century village (Adair-Toteff 58). Even though Tönnies was referring more to relationships than to an organizational structure, the idea of an isolated group played a large part in his search for community, as exemplified by his plans for an isolated academy for philosophy students (Adair-Toteff 63).

In "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," Putnam finds degrees of trust and cooperation in groups that do not fit the structure in Tönnies's theory. Putnam focuses on social capital, which he refers to as the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 67). Social capital is Putnam's measure of community. It refers to the same bonds which bound people together in Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft*. Putnam, however, finds his social capital in groups that would not qualify as Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft*. One example is bowling leagues.

Participants in these leagues unite with each other based on an interest, a leisure activity, not living together in isolation like the village in Tönnies's theory (Putnam 70). Both groups achieve a degree of trust and cooperation that extends into many areas of their members' lives. People achieve the benefits of *Gemeinschaft* without living in the isolation of *Gemeinschaft*, showing that community is not limited to the structure that Tönnies's theory sets forth.

Group structures continue to change as people and their tastes change, preventing any specific group from giving community a lasting definition. In arguing that America's social capital has declined, Putnam points at declining formal membership in a variety of organizations such as labor unions and churches (Putnam 67-8). While diminishing numbers in these groups can lead to fewer opportunities for people to interact and develop social capital, the lost numbers may simply highlight a shift in people's preferences. Political economist Peter Hall examined whether or not a decline in membership among certain British voluntary organizations indicated a decline in social capital. He found that group membership had only shifted from one group to another. For example, women's groups lost members while environmental groups gained members (Bruce 324-5). In the United States, similar trends exist. While groups such as bowling leagues are losing members (Putnam 70), groups such as U.S. Youth Soccer are steadily gaining members (Lemann 25). In regard to U.S. churches, an overall decline in membership does not take into account the popularity of specific denominations or that social capital may actually be strengthening among the remaining members. My family attends a Foursquare church and has watched it grow. My parents are involved in activities and have, in the last few years, developed more personal networks of trust and cooperation than ever before. The groups that Putnam uses to define community have become outdated, but social capital remains due to the development of new groups.

Changes in technology also create community in ways that make traditional group structures obsolete. In *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, Putnam looks at Craigslist, a website with local websites in different cities meant to connect people in each city. These websites develop trust and cooperation in relationships among many of these people through what Putnam sees as only the possibility of face to face contact, not actual face to face contact (Putnam and Feldstein 225-40). This observation is a departure for Putnam who previously held that face to face interaction was necessary for the development of social capital (Lemann 25). Technology has enabled people to form community in increasingly wider areas by providing electronic meeting grounds.

While elements of trust and cooperation exist in a variety of different groups, this is not to say that they have the same strength. People living together in Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* will be closer to one another than people united by a website. A website only involves as much of one's life as one desires, and it is much easier for one to leave a website than a village where one's family and history is based. The gradual trend away from village life to groups with more voluntary and flexible membership may show a weakening in the bonds of community, raising the question of how strong social capital must be for a group to be a community.

Tönnies and Putnam both wanted trust and cooperation for the good of a group or society, as opposed to individualistic endeavors. Both men found these qualities in specific group structures and watched as these groups became irrelevant in an evolving world. These qualities do remain important in the finding and defining of community. Whether a group consists of a village or frequent users of a website, it is the varying degrees of these qualities that will determine the existence and strength of community.

Works Cited

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