

Keeping your head above the clouds: a sense of community in a superficial environment

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of contemporary community in terms of personal autonomy and the superficiality necessary to concurrently enable personal growth and community. Based on an ethnographic study of a loosely defined bohemian group around Fremantle, Western Australia, I examine the nature of individuation and how this plays out in a community arena. Of particular importance is the struggle to simultaneously create a personalised sense of space; a feeling of community; a negotiation between the mythic 'bohemian' notion of the area and the gentrified reality; and ultimately how to be both an individual and part of a place or group. This paper will briefly examine how the openness of the environment and the pre-existing superficiality go towards creating a community that is workable in terms of allowing individuality, commonality and personal negotiation of ethics and morality. It will also highlight the importance of an outwardly superficial and uncaring social environment in the maintenance of diverse, though oddly consistent, lifestyles.

Key words

community, modernity, identity, sustainability



Personal autonomy and community

Fremantle is an old port town twenty kilometres south-west of Perth, Western Australia. It has, since the late 1960s come to be associated with alternative lifestyles and bohemian enclaves, and more recently become known as an affluent area. Its public image advertises multiple alfresco coffee shops and restaurants, which service a vibrant artistic, cultural and multi-ethnic community, and it is this diverse community that is the focus of the paper. The term 'community' usually brings up notions of a *gemeinschaft*, or village style and essentially exclusionist sociality, but this interpretation is not terribly applicable to the area. I will be sidestepping this perspective to focus more on the openness, diversity and superficiality of the social environment and the way that this is the key to its success. As such I will be highlighting how the community actually functions, as opposed to how it relates to the romanticised and unrealistic interpretation of what community should be. Particular emphasis will be placed on the non-professional and alternative groups in the area, how they simultaneously maintain individual autonomy and a communal set of beliefs, and how the superficiality within the locale, rather than diminishing it, contributes to creating this open environment.

Method

The information herein was gathered through six months of participant observation and interviews in Fremantle. Having lived in the area for six years, I was familiar with the local venues, meeting places and house parties, which are where I started gathering informants and observing social interaction. The interview group, which consisted of fifteen participants and was randomly chosen from the local population, was involved in two recorded interviews. These interviews consisted of an initial series of questions relating to the personal history of the interviewee and a later series of questions regarding the workings of their immediate social environment and their experiences of Fremantle in general. After the



initial set of interviews I ran a second set using the same participants, which more closely examined data found from the first round. Finally, I ran a focus group in which the respondents were asked to come to agreement on certain issues pertaining to the current state of community in the locale, and also to comment on a series of moral questions both to see how the group responded to issues of personal space and common morality, and to determine how the group negotiated personal feelings about group norms. The information presented herein is an overview of the central themes that emerged from the data.

Theoretical overview

One theme that has re-emerged in contemporary sociology is the demise of community. In his much-publicised book, *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam wrote of the reduction in communal activity, which he sees as a key indicator of the collapse of American community. In this text, the reduction in the numbers of individuals engaged in mass group activities, such as bowling, men's lodges and volunteer civic participation, which he sees as the vanguard of American communal life, is shown to be in decline. He theorises from this that community, as we know it, is dead. Another commentary on community comes from Zygmunt Bauman, who proposes that due to the individuation of western society, there is no longer anything which one could call community (2001; 2001b). He claims that society in general is undergoing a change from group activity to individual activity, the result of which is a rejection of communal themes in favour of individual ones. Richard Sennett adds to this by suggesting that contemporary individuals are actually incapable of engaging in public and communal activity (1974; 2006). These three hugely influential authors are but a few of the voices claiming that community is lost; that we as individuals are doomed to exist in the ever-tightening vice of privatised consumption and space, and that the themes of individualism and community are antithetical. But these arguments are hardly new. Simmel (1973) and Durkheim (1960) observed this phenomenon earlier last century; where



they saw cities as spaces of both alienation and freedom, brought about chiefly through an enforced social distance and estrangement between city dwellers. Given the amount of literature on this phenomenon, why are these theorists so concerned about something that has been exhaustively documented? The answer must surely lie in some form of romanticism with community; why else would the above authors point out the death of something which has been extinct for quite some time? It is, in my opinion, more of a fascination with the *concept* of community, as opposed to the reality of one, which drives these *new* perspectives. These arguments seem to be based on the somewhat erroneous understanding of community typified by Tonnies (1954): the *gemeinschaft*, or village-like, environment, where all individuals know each other, where few group members travel beyond its boundaries and where all community members are looked after. Even though this perception of community has been shown to be a cultural myth (Williams 1975) there is still an appeal to this model, probably for the safety, security and simplicity that Bauman suggests (2001), but the reality of what actually goes on in contemporary community is somewhat different. Communities, such as the one under investigation, are not as compact or as closed as one would imagine; they are far more diverse and far more open.

Richard Florida (2002) starts to take up this theme of openness and diversity as being economically beneficial. He points to the inclusiveness, or rather the non-oppressive nature of an environment as being significant, but he applies it to an exclusively economic end. He also fails to analyse adequately what is actually going on in the communities that he comments on. It is this, as well as pointing out the inadequacies of a romantic notion of community, which this paper will address. The following will provide a brief insight into the workings of a contemporary urban community, based far more on fluidity than solidity, more on superficiality than deep personal involvement, and ultimately providing a way in which the themes of individualisation and community can be combined in some form of synthesis.



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>

The superficial community

The title of this paper refers to a comment made by Lex, a local musician. When I asked him to describe what community meant to him, he said:

My image [of community] is the huge urban sprawl, and there is this cloud over the top, and there's a bunch of people that look above the cloud and see one another. That's the community. It's who you see above the clouds. But it's so spread out; you have to look over the countryside to see each other. But not everyone sticks their head up at the same time.

So for him the community is something that is looked for, but is ultimately dependant on who is around at the time and where you go to look for them. The reason for choosing this quote over others is that it most closely describes the nature of this community, that is, not wholly joined but also not completely devoid of commonality, and ultimately about personal choice. There is more of an association with it, as opposed to a forced governance of the community upon the individual, and it is more something searched for, as opposed to something that comes automatically. It is, in theoretical terms, more akin to Castells' network society (1996), or rather, networks of networks, than say the rigid *gemeinschaft* community, but also linked to the aforementioned individualisation thesis of Bauman, where individuals can choose their own level of commitment to whatever facets of the community they want to be a part of. So, to join the community is a personal choice, but it is guided by where, when and how far or high one is looking above these clouds of urban separation. This is the first point then: that this community is personal; it allows the individual the freedom to select and engage in the parts of the locale that they see fit. But where are the spaces where they seek each other out?

Fremantle has a history of cafés and live music venues where, since the early seventies, locals have met and carried on the business of getting to know one another. In more recent



years a large majority of these venues, particularly the music venues, have been replaced with nightclubs, attracting more custom from outside Fremantle than locals. The view of interviewees on this 'intrusion' is quite negative. All informants expressed the attitude that Fremantle central is not a good place to go on the weekends, with one informant suggesting that there were actually two Fremantles: one used by locals and one used by outsiders. Given this, most of the interaction and meeting of others in the 'local' occurs in non-commercial spaces. The two most important of these are shared houses, where individuals meet friends of their housemates, and the house party, where many diverse groups and individuals converge regularly to talk, meet people, or just to get more drunk or stoned after a night out.

The shared-house situation generally occurs in rented premises, where all tenants pay for a private bedroom and share other facilities. Unlike other urban environments, these premises are usually houses, as opposed to flats, and have ample space for group socialising. The relationships established through the common sharing of space appear to be both the best form of introduction to the area and the most efficient way to establish deep bonds with others in the community. Many of the informants suggested that this was how they came to know their first friends in the area and how they began to 'hang-out' with the group that they now associate with. Mike and Alan express this opinion below

Mike: It comes down to sharing with people, you live with certain types of people and not with others; you share values. And your identity is wrapped up with this. You become like the people you live with, it sets the pattern of who you are, who you going to associate with ... So the household is really important. But your social networks extend far beyond this.



Alan: A mate at work asked me to move into a house and his friends became my friends. I thought that everyone was close to him, but some people were at the end of their friendship, some at the beginning, some didn't really know him. I found a common interest in talking about music and life. Some became closer friends than others. I became close to people that were nothing like me. Possibly share a couple of interests but in every other way different, but maybe that was the attraction, but I've always wanted that.

So, by moving into a house, not only does one get an immediate group of associates and information on where to go to in town, but more importantly, one gains access to the friends of one's housemates. This appears to be the entry point into the community, though many interviewees said that they met most of their friends at gigs or parties, but these were mainly associates, as opposed to deep friendships. The solid friendships were generally established by either living with people, or through getting to know them through other friends. It is also common for individuals to move between houses fairly regularly, roughly once per year, and therefore to change their groups of immediate friends again. The initial groups met may remain in their life to some extent or may not, but either way, moving house extends or alters the groups of people known to the individual.

The second important space is the house party. This is a weekly phenomenon occurring in random houses throughout Fremantle. House parties usually start around nine in the evening and, if large enough, can proceed early into the morning. News of these events is spread to close friends but, more generally, information about them is spread through text messaging one's 'party connections': associates from a diverse set of groups that one will use *exclusively* to find out about events, with no other form of communication apart from party information expected. As parties are non-commercial spaces, and therefore lacking in the sanctioning of space one would expect from a pub or coffee shop, and are generally open to all, there is



little in the way of restrictions to conversations or to whom one is allowed speak. This reduction, or re-ordering (Malbon 1999) of regulation allows for a more spontaneous level of communication between individuals and groups. This is a space in which each person is allowed to talk to everyone, resulting in very dense, but superficial, milieux of conversations and interaction. All informants said that the party was essentially the heart of the community, where they can access the multitude of diverse individuals living locally. However, all interviewees also recognised the limitations of it with relation to the depth of relationship one finds at a party.

Alan: I've known people that have trouble continuing going to parties. They felt like when they went to parties and shared something deep with someone it wasn't recognised afterwards; there was no recognition of that moment. Some people go through painful situations with this. They reveal something about themselves and it's not followed up. But this is not a problem for me, it's about sharing the moment and moving on

In the above statement, Alan describes what is known to anyone who has partied for a long time; that the party is for superficial connections only. This superficiality is particularly important. There is no depth of conversation at a party; no real commitment to anyone other than the commitment to have a conversation and to share the moment. It is also an open forum for individuals to engage with others, with little observable restriction apart from violence or anything more than a superficial connection; deep emotion or sadness are not acceptable topics at a party. This theme is not restricted to the party, but seems to flow into the rest of local life too.

Alan: Some one tried to organise daytime activities once, but I wasn't interested. Once there was a daytime cricket thing, but this was more like a party anyway.



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Derek: You get to know too many people, if you were to say hello to them all, you'd get a sore arm, so you just start ignoring them when you see them after a while.

The interviewees were not alone in commenting on this. Many younger party goers or people new to the area are very quick to point out the communal feeling and the warmth, or acceptance, of the social environment, but quickly come to realise its superficial and transitory nature. So while not all social relations in the locale are completely devoid of depth and emotional support, it appears that a large majority of them are.

From going to parties, living with others, encountering others at smaller household gatherings and meeting friends' friends in a number of spaces around the locale, one is able to connect with one, or more likely many, groups of individuals. And it is these meetings that make up one's personal community. However, a large percentage of these relationships will not contain any level of emotional involvement. On a less personal and more macro level, the result of all these superficial interactions is a wide and dense network of individuals, who are socialising on many levels with many groups across the locale. The diversity, openness and personally elected level of community participation implied above could not occur in a closed or more traditional concept of community. The transience of the local community, for instance, would not be tolerated in a tighter social structure. Likewise, the diversity of interest and communal beliefs would not be allowed to flourish under a rigid and uncompromising set of hierarchical structures, which would also prevent many elements of the community interacting with others. It is this superficiality, then, that allows the community to be interconnected, but simultaneously provides it with the cultural space necessary to maintain an open community. But something else also emerges from this high level of interaction.



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A number of key themes were found across interviewees. First was a propensity to travel; most interviewees came from elsewhere to live in the area and most of them travel frequently, resulting in a fairly transient local population. The second was a level of individualism and commitment to personal freedoms, such as selection of lifestyle and the choosing of one's own friends and social groups; most interviewees professed a dislike for locked in, or rigid social structures, which they had either previously been a part of or been excluded from. Third was a desire to achieve some level of spiritual fulfilment, though not in the sense of wanting to follow a formal religious doctrine, as a result of their dissatisfaction with overt consumption and macro societal norms, which they saw as essentially pointless. And this is the fourth similarity: that all individuals saw themselves as distinct from the general public. Not that there is anything new about this. Most groups, especially sub-cultural ones, choose not to identify with the 'mainstream' (Thornton 1995), but in this case it seemed to be indicative of an entire locale; much like Lloyd's *Wicker Park* example (2006).

There is, then, a consistent similarity between individuals' philosophical perspectives across the locale, and something like a common culture appears to be in existence. So, despite the lack of deep connection between individuals, multiple common themes exist within the locale. This common culture is brought about through the many informal interactions between the inhabitants across all facets of the social landscape, and the societal and cultural norms that come into existence as a result. Furthermore, it is this acceptable level of superficial engagement that aids in the construction of the open community. So, much like a *gemeinschaft* community, the area has a common way of thinking; it has insiders and outsiders, and a common set of beliefs to which the majority adhere. But at the same time, it is fluid or superficial enough to prevent overtly hierarchical structures from emerging, allowing for freedom of choice in relation to levels of personal involvement, and an openness within the locale to accept others.



It could be argued that this cannot be a community, that any group that does not ultimately care for each other is nothing more than a hedonistic lifestyle enclave (Bellah et al. 1985, p. 73). But in this group I have seen the negotiation of a common morality that does not overtly restrict the individual. I have witnessed chaotic social situations involving 300 intoxicated individuals which *never* erupted into violence. A local set of norms develop around keeping individuals together, yet sufficiently apart so as not to intrude on personal space. There is a common perception amongst all interviewees that the environment is a very distinct bohemian enclave with its own norms, customs and identities. As such, this area and its inhabitants are no less a community than an isolated rural village. They have their own set of cultural norms, their own forms of cultural interpretation and their own boundaries. The only distinction between this and other forms of community is the lack of rigidity and the superficial nature of the environment. But as I have said, it is this superficiality that allows the openness, inclusiveness, acceptance of personal space and transience within the community to exist.

Conclusion

In this paper I am not attempting to point out a new form of utopian community, as this system also has its casualties, such as Sean, who has 'been partying for twenty years ... [and] got nothing to show for it'. My aim is to present an alternative concept of what community is, and to show that understanding what creates a community, or sustainable urban environment, by exclusively focusing on rigid and idealised notions of urban environments is the wrong way to go. Furthermore, this paper starts to deconstruct the assumed incompatibility between individualism and community by showing the ways in which personal space can be achieved simultaneously with social and community ties.

Maybe Putnam was right. These individuals do not go to bowling clubs or men's lodges and they are not so cohesive that they would ever call themselves a gang or even a subculture,



but they do get together, and they do have rules. They are similar to Florida's interpretation of the creative class, or rather, represent the sort of people, and the type of environment he alluded to. But they are more an example of how individuals can retain some autonomy in the face of community and how urban sociality functions without the limiting practices of an austere and exclusionist social environment. Finally, this is an example of a contemporary functioning urban community that is outside the bounds of romanticised and mythic concepts of how community *should* work.

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