

Notions of Community at a Midwest University

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Abstract

Using qualitative research methods, the researcher uses unstructured in-depth interviews in order to understand notions of community at a Midwest university. The researcher interviews students, resident advisors, resident hall coordinators, members of registered student organizations, and students who live both on and off campus in order to find out how people at the university view “community” and how it is or is not incorporated into their lives as members of the university. Findings suggest that a person’s notion of community is related to what stakes he or she has in the university. Students find and build community through personal and common interests, geographical location, and through the use of networking websites. The author also finds that there are disjunctions in community building on campus due to the physical landscape of the university and due to students competing commitments to work or live off-campus.

Keywords: community, student life, RSO, resident halls, social networks, physical space, facebook.

This study took place on a Midwest university campus during the fall semester of 2007 for a course in the department of sociology and anthropology entitled Ethnography. The topic of community was chosen out of the interest of the researcher, which sprang out of curiosity from taking an independent study of ethnographic texts on the topic of community as well as a course entitled People and Places.

There is no single definition of community in the scholarly literature. George Hillery (1955) lists 94 definitions of community and finds a wide range of variation between definitions. He finds that “beyond the concept that people are involved in community, there is no complete agreement as to the nature of community” and “with the class of definitions concerned with ecological relationships excluded, the remaining authors agree that the concept of community is to be found within the broader concept of social interaction (either with or without area) and, furthermore, that an area of common ties and social interaction can be presented in a community” (Hillery, 1995: 119).

I wanted to study community at the university, however, I choose not to define community at the beginning of my study because I did not want to limit the participants to my own preconceived notion of community. Instead, I went to the faculty and students of the university and asked them to define community so that I could understand how people at the university view community and how they take part in it. Seeking the individuals’ meanings, I went into “the field” with one main question in mind: How do various university members define community at the university and how and where do they take part in it? The rest just followed.

Researching Community

The methods I have used have been primarily unstructured in-depth interviews. I found that when I started asking people questions with an interview guide the participant appeared to limit themselves to the questions that I asked. They would answer the question at hand without going into much detail and then waiting for the next question on my guide. When I stopped bringing along an interview guide to the meetings, the interview seemed more like a conversation rather than a question and answer session. The participants would then go into detail about things that they felt were important and explored areas that I would not have thought to otherwise ask. Although this did not allow for standardization of the topics that were covered in each interview, it did make the interviews more meaningful to both the participant and myself as a researcher.

I have always felt that it makes the most sense to start off with what you know. So in order to obtain participants for the research I started off interviewing people that I knew; friends I had made in the dorms, students I had met in classes, and people I had met at work. I did this for two reasons: first, because it was a convenient starting point, and second because the people I did not know would agree to the interview at first and then not respond when contacted to set up a time. With people I had been previously acquainted it was easy to get into the conversation and ask questions.

After the first couple interviews, I asked the participants what they thought of the questions I had asked. The first person suggested that I begin with asking respondents what their definition of community is so that it would frame the rest of the conversation. This made a lot of sense, doing this helped to not only get a definition of what a certain person's notion of community was, but it would also make us both be on the same page. The rest of the conversation would then explain why that definition was important to the person. I took this advice to heart because the feedback I received from close friends provided to be invaluable when conducting interviews with

participants I was not familiar with. The remaining people I conducted interviews was what one would generally call a snowball sampling technique; where one participant gives the researcher the name of another participant to speak with. Although this term is only semi-accurate to describe the method that was used, truthfully I would call it more a word of mouth technique. The reason I refer to it as a word of mouth technique is because I asked people I knew if they could think of anyone that were in an RSO or if anyone knew a resident hall coordinator that would not mind speaking with me. Often these people would think about it for a few days and then email me with someone's contact information.

I proceeded by contacting people to describe my study and noted that the mutual acquaintance suggested I contact them. I then told them what types of questions I would be asking and informed them that their participation was voluntary. The word of mouth participants were always the most reliable to not only respond to the invitation to be part of the research, but also to follow through with the interview. All of the interviews were conducted at the location of the participant's choice. The locations of interviews varied; sometimes they were in dorm rooms, sometimes offices, at a restaurant, at the library, and even in a car. The interviews in people's offices or residence halls were very private; the door was closed and no one else was in the room. Interviews at other locations were semi-private; although they were in a public setting, we sat away from where people could hear us. In the instance of the interview that took place late one night at a Denny's restaurant, the participant and myself sat in a booth that was partitioned off from the mass of people and noise by a half wall/ half window structure. All of the interviews were audio recorded with the participant's permission to ensure accuracy, except for two that were conducted at the very beginning of the semester as discovery interviews. All students were also asked to read and sign the informed consent form before the beginning of each interview. The participants

presented in this paper have been given a pseudonym in order to protect their identity.

I interviewed a total of nine university participants between the ages of 18 and 30. Five of the participants were male, and four were female. One of the interviewees was a freshman, one was a junior, one was a residence hall coordinator, and the remaining six were seniors. All of the college students either lived on or off campus; none of the participants commuted more than 15 minutes to the university. All of the participants except two had previously lived on campus their first two years and one participant was currently living in the residence halls as a resident advisor (RA). Two of the participants were involved in registered student organizations (RSO) on campus; one of which was the president. Collectively these student's experiences represent a wide range of investment in the university and although the sample cannot be considered representative of the university population, the experiences of these students are typical of college students at this university.

Defining Community:

Like Hillery, (1955) I found a large variety in the definition of community at the university. No two people ever defined community in the same way. I discovered that the definition of community any individual had was dependent on the stakes they held in the university. A woman named Mary who is the resident hall coordinator (RHC) at an all girls dormitory defined community with the following:

“When you have community, it is a group of people who respect each other and it is a group of people who collaborates with each other. It is a little bit of compromising and a lot of collaboration. You can really tell when a group really cares about each other; things will happen on the floor. They will enforce policies when RA's don't have to; those sorts of things. And I think that a community is not necessarily everybody being best friends, that's not going to happen and we all know that, but watching out for each other and being respectful. It's all about respect to me.”

In contrast to some students who describe community in terms of social networks, friendships, or common interests the RHC places emphasis on respect and collaboration; two things that it is in

the interest of residence hall staff to emphasize due to the large and diverse population and her need to enforce housing regulations. In the residence halls it is inevitable that people are going to have conflicts, however, through an emphasis on respect; the coordinator is able to define community in terms of what would make an ideal living environment for the students and staff: a law-abiding self monitoring group.

When asked to define community, Thad, the president of a bicycling RSO called the Fixed Marquis said it is “a collective... Because a community can be a community of people, you know, that they have to define themselves in someway.” Thad feels that his community has been created as a lifestyle group; people who believe in bicycling as an alternative form of transportation. The fact that he talks about community in terms of a process in which the members need to define themselves is interesting because it parallels the process in which his community of fellow bike riders emerged. It all began when he and a friend started riding their bicycles about a year ago. Then they found more people who were interested in bicycles and the lifestyle and eventually more and more people joined. Soon enough they had a collective of people who were all interested in the same thing and decided to fill out the paperwork in order to become an RSO. To them the notion of community has to do with the way in which the group defines themselves; this group defines themselves as a collective of bicycle advocates. Because their definition of community has to do with a common interest in bicycles, the membership expands not only on campus, but off campus and to distant cities as well.

Other students who view themselves as not being directly involved in the university because they do not participate in registered students organizations or other student groups tend to view the definition of community in terms of social networks. Karen, a music education major at ISU who is a very dedicated student defined community as:

“Where you choose to fit in when you come to college...I see community as a group of people

with common interests. Like for me, being involved in choir was a community, or being a music major was a community...I think that it is one that we spend a lot of time together and two that we share a common interest and a common goal.”

For this student, the notion of community is viewed in terms of the different networks that the student has developed at the university through courses related to her major. Since the stakes that she hold in the university are directly related to academics and obtaining good grades in her courses, she views community as a group of people who share the same interests and goals that she does.

Physical Space, Cyber Space, and Imagined Space

Physical Space

University members mentioned several types of spaces related to the notion of community at the university. Many students talked about how the physical characteristics of the university played a vital role in the development of community on campus. The physical space can both contribute to the development of community and as well as create limitations. This concept was most prevalent when speaking about the dorms on campus. Buildings where the rooms are right across the hall from each other are able to develop as strong sense of community because people are in constant contact with each other: “All you have to do is open your door and walk across the hall and see friends.” This constant contact enhances the notion of community because people feel connected to each other through their residency. Common areas also provide a space in which an R.A. can hold community-building activities as well as function as a gathering space for members of the community.

The physical space of a dormitory can also limit the building of community. With renovations of residence halls currently underway, lobbies are being used for supplemental housing for students who would otherwise be housed in actual rooms. This subtracts the possible space for R.A.’s to hold programs for their residents. In dorms such as Walker, they are forced to hold

programs in hallways which can be problematic because at “at the North and South ends it kind of curves, so it is hard to see unless you are in the center.” When proximity with other people is crucial to the development of community, the limitations of not having lobbies often creates hurdles because there are fewer chances to come into contact with people that one would otherwise and have less spaces to engage in community building activities.

Another student noted how the different layout of the bathrooms in the residence halls Hewett and Hamilton-Whitten helped and prohibited the building of community:

“In Hewett the floors are divided in the middle so there are two sets of bathrooms, and in Hamilton-Whitten there is only one big bathroom for everyone. So the thing is that you see everyone in the bathroom, so you get to see more people. And I know that is awkward, but everyone is just showering and doing their make-up and everything and you see them going in and out more. But when it was like in Hewett, it was segregated more. So it would be one half of the floor and another half of the floor. So as an RA I saw that the girls that lived on my end and used the same bathrooms met more often. And when you get in the bathroom you do small talk and get to know people.”

The physical placement of the bathrooms is crucial in the development of community in residence halls. In the first dorm there were two bathrooms at each end of the hall. And since students would use the bathroom that was closest to their room, this segregated the floor in two: one half would use one bathroom while the other half would use the other. In the second dorm, there was only one large bathroom for the students and they were forced to come into contact more often. Because the students had more opportunities to interact through small talk in the hall with one large bathroom the sense of community for the entire floor than in the dorm with two. The physical dimensions of Hewett limited the community building for the floor as a whole because students would seldom come in contact with each other.

The physical landscape of Watterson also has a negative effect on the building of community as a whole because the floors are sectioned off into suites. The RHC noted,

“You’ll have A suite and B suite together and then C and D suite together, but there is a blockage there because there is a staircase that goes in-between the suites. And the R.A. has to be an R.A. for that entire area, so a lot of community gets built maybe in that little suite area, but even the way it is situated with, almost like little cubbies, because it is very closed off. A lot of students

like it because it is more private. But it just makes it in general harder to build community in Waterson.”

While older students appreciate the privacy that Watterson affords, it is harder to create a community dynamic because of the sectioning off of suites into “cubbies.” Aside from R.A. programs that each floor is required to hold, the residents come into little contact with each other since they only see people in their suite section.

The types of doors in residence halls also have an effect on community. Students often talked about how opening doors in a residence hall promoted a welcoming atmosphere. When people have open doors other residents are more likely to stop by or say hi on the way to their own rooms. When talking about how some places it is easier to build community than others, an RHC noted that in west campus the problem is that the doors shut automatically, you have to prop them open. And now that the university is renovating buildings they are installing more doors that shut automatically. That is a hurdle when building community because people do not open their doors as often and so are limited in the welcoming nature of the floors.

A common theme when talking with students is that they feel like there is a limitation in the building of community from the Tri-towers residence halls and the rest of campus. Tri is separated from the rest of campus by a highway, a professional development building, a field house, student services, an Arena, and a stadium. Not only do students come in contact with these students less frequently because of the physical distance from the rest of campus. From some areas of campus it can take up to twenty minutes to walk there whereas other dorm buildings range from five to ten minutes in walking time. Students not living in those dormitories mention they have few reasons to venture out that far from campus and then come in less frequent contact with these students.

Cyberspace

While the most common components to a definition of community include people interacting,

common bond, and a shared institution, the question of geography comes into play. While researchers such as John Perry Barlow (1995) stress that the physical reality is important and that there is no substitute for bonds with neighbors and that cyberspace offers no prana or shared adversity, other researchers such as Rheingold (1995) suggest that community can exist in cyberspace because of common interests, support, and a feeling of belonging to something. While the issue of whether cyberspace acts as a community is an interesting one, I contribute to this debate by arguing that students at the university do not use social networking websites such as facebook as communities unto themselves, but rather as a tool for enhancing and maintaining community.

While students at the university did not mention that cyberspace was a source of community, they often claimed that they utilized cyberspace as a place for the continuation and development of community. Cyberspace acted as a social network that although does not meet in any physical space, students still feel is important aspect of their community. Often students made references to facebook as a way of staying in contact with friends and other students. One student mentioned that facebook was a way in which he was able to keep in touch with friends on campus during the week that they cannot see because of classes and work. It keeps them connected when they cannot physically be together. Another student mentioned that they utilize facebook as a way to contact other students. Often students will message another student in the class in order to ask questions about assignments, ask for class notes, or schedule time to work on group projects.

Student organizations also utilize networking websites. Sabrina, who is involved in a service sorority on campus states that their sorority uses facebook as a way in which to publicize events and keep people in touch of what is going on with the events. The Fixed Marquis have a facebook group for their student organization that allows for all the members of their community to stay on

the same page: “facebook is a communication tool. So is the myspace. Plus if other people are interested they can easily get info.” By creating a profile at these two social networking websites they have been able to get information out to a vast amount of people.

University officials also utilize cyberspace as a way to develop community among students and keep people in touch. The English department recently sent out an email to all students on the list serve to tell them:

We are starting a new English Advising Blog to get advising information out to you quicker and easier. This will also allow you to interact with us, as well as other students. In addition to the Blog, we've also started a Facebook Group on English Advising.

Cyberspace then is a tool that university members to maintain and create community when the groups cannot be in persistent contact with each other. Social networking sites such as facebook allow for students to not only maintain their networks but also provides students with a place in which they can come in contact with students that they do not consistently see.

Imagined Space

The notion that community does not have to have a defined geographical setting also comes into play when students talk about community in terms of an imagined space. While these students are still aware that the geographical locale of the university exists, they do not perceive community as necessarily being a part of a shared locale, but rather as an imagined space in which the social networks of the student lie. The networks of which the student belongs to never meet as a larger collective, however, through involvement with numerous smaller groups the student envisions community as the larger collective of all their networks.

Imagined space most frequently occurs when students move off campus. Karen, a student who moved off campus her junior year spoke of how her idea of community at the university does is not limited to any specific location at the university. The collective perception of community

not sharing one physical space can be best understood when I asked Karen if she thought of community as an academics/department, or social community, “I think it is all of it, it’s a variety, of like you’re involved in a lot, I think without knowing it. I feel like you’re in a community as your university, a community as your floor, a community as your classrooms, and your friends. They all overlap. Like you can be in eight communities at the same time.” Her perspective of community consists of a collection of various smaller communities.

While some students who live on-campus define community in terms of residence halls, students who move off-campus are no longer invested in the creation of community in student apartments. Their world widens, their notion of community is expanded and instead of defining community in terms of their immediate surroundings they include many different smaller communities none of which share a common space. Karen, for example, incorporates the church community, with her friends, and music majors into her definition. While these groups share the fact that they attend the same university, the only common space that they occupy is only in Karen’s notion of what community is.

The people in the social network may also reach beyond campus as well. Thad, the president of the Fixed Marquis, noted that his community was attempting to reach beyond this university to other universities bicycle groups as well, “so we can start like a regional network where we can go to those towns and we can all ride together as well.” He later told me that a bicycle group from a university in the northern part of the state invited them up for “tricks and drinks” where they could come show off the stunts they could do on their bikes and later have a few drinks. While Thad’s notion of community as a group that defines themselves incorporates the bicycle group at the university he attends, it also reaches to distant universities as well.

Disconnections

Disconnections in community building also exist in students who live or work off campus. According to the university fact book, 65.3% of students live off campus and 24.3% of students work off campus. While these figures may appear to be meaningless, these figures play a crucial role in the way students experience community at the university.

Students frequently mentioned the problem with moving off-campus is that you no longer feel connected to the university as you once did living in the residence halls. Jeremy, a student who had been an RA for several semesters and had just recently moved off campus to do student teaching said, “the worst thing you could do for your sense of community at the university is move off campus.” Knowing that I was an off-campus student as well, he posed this question, “how many of your neighbors do you know?” I replied only the one that lived downstairs because he is constantly irritating me. His response: “there you go. When you move in, there is a sense of uncertainty and it takes a long time to build rapport with them because you are not in daily contact with them in close encounters. And living off-campus is a loss of community because when you live off-campus you go to class and then come home.” When moving into off campus apartments students find that there is less of an urgency to get to know and interact with your neighbors.

The university requires first and second year students to live in the residence halls. This group of students is different from their older off-campus counterparts because they are invested in finding their place: “I think that everyone [in the residence halls] has that need to form those relationships that they had in like high school; that comfort and support. So I think that you kind of gravitate towards everyone and figure out who you mesh with.” Another student mentioned that the reason that there was such a difference between the community living on and off campus is because freshmen are “just sort of thrown into the mix. So you really had to reach out to people. And you kind of had to turn your floor into your home... And because everyone [is] like brand-

new and fresh cut, people [are] able to just gel a lot better together.” After students have done their time living in the residence halls and move off-campus, students find that other students have already settled in and developed friendships so they are not as inclined to meet and incorporate new people into their social networks.

Other students mentioned the problems associated with staying in touch with communities that had been developed while living on campus.

“when I moved off-campus I was really lonely, and it’s weird because you’re use to having all those people around you all the time, and I guess you have to work a lot harder to maintain that sense of community because you’re all in different places...because there are certain people that I would like to see a lot more, but I don’t...it’s just that our schedules are so opposite during the day that we don’t like come home to each other.”

Students who move off-campus after their first two required years of living in the residence halls find a diminished sense of community because they are no longer living in the dorms where community is promoted through close encounters with other students on a daily basis. These students find that it is hard to maintain the closeness that was developed while living in the residence halls because everyone is spread out over the town and they have to go out of their way to see them.

Students who work off-campus also feel a diminished sense of community. Jake a student who works at an off-campus grocery store mentioned that he does not really feel as though he is connected to the university because he lives off-campus and works off-campus as well. He believes that living and working off campus really hinders his ability to make friends at the university. He finds that he makes more friends in places where he spends most of his time and since he spends more time at work than on campus, most of his friends are made through working with them. The disconnection with living and working off campus is that it subtracts the possibility of social interaction with other university students.

Conclusions

Suggestions to the University

With the current research in mind, I would make the following suggestions to the university: first, think about how the physical dimensions of the residence halls affect community building with the upcoming renovations. The university is currently undergoing massive renovations of the residence halls. In order to create a greater sense of community they could consider creating more attractive communal areas in centralized locations. These areas serve as a great place to have floor socials, group study sessions, and a gathering area.

Second, survey the students to see what their needs are, what activities they actually engage in, and how they actually use space on campus and cater the student center to their needs. The university student center claims that it acts as “the hub of student life,” however, in informal conversation students mention that they only use this building to purchase books twice a year from the bookstore, for the ATM, or as a dining center. While doing observations I walked through this building several times to see what it was being used for. Often it was dead except during the lunch rush at Burger King and Pizza Hut. If the university conducted focus groups to find out what the students actually wanted in a student center then it perhaps it would serve the purpose it was built for and then it will actually be considered a “hub of student life”.

Third, the university could also remedy the disconnection created by students working and living off campus. They would have to provide two things: more affordable on-campus housing and attractive job opportunities. It is well known by the student body that living in off-campus apartments often time is less expensive than living in the residence halls. Also many students seek off-campus jobs because the wages are more attractive and they prefer a position that is not in food service. The university should create and promote more on campus jobs for students that live off-campus. If working off campus creates a disjunction in the building of community at ISU, having

positions that cater to upperclassmen could ultimately close this gap. Jobs within departments working on student projects could not only further the students' involvement and help their finances, but it could be a selling point for students to attend the university because of these types opportunities.

Future Research

This research was accomplished over the course of one semester and is by no means a complete understanding of how members perceive community at the university. While the research presented here can act as a starting point for others interested in studying community at the university, future researchers might delve deeper into topics presented in the current research.

In my project I incorporated several different 'types' of people into the sample. I spoke with regular students, residence hall coordinators, past and present RAs, and students involved in RSOs. Other studies might look more specifically at RSOs and how they perceive community and if and how their RSO promotes it. It would also be intriguing to see how different members of a particular RSO, especially sororities or fraternities, view community and how it relates to their goals. As well as how it is developed and maintained.

I had not anticipated that students would speak freely about how the physical space of the university affected community building and was not able to go further in-depth on the subject. Another project might look more closely into how other aspects of how the physical landscape of the university impacts community. Students also mentioned the student center as being a space in which needs to be improved; looking into how students actually use this building and how they would like it to be improved would be interesting as well.

Another interesting area of research would be on how students and faculty use cyberspace as a community tool. While students mentioned facebook frequently, it would be interesting to see

how and why they use other social networking websites as well as instant messenger programs and how they perceive these programs. Asking students to fill out time allocation forms to see how frequently and for what purpose they use cyberspace would be very thought provoking.

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