

Conflict and Co-operation between Groups, and their relevance to community work

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Communities involve people. There are many types of community, some ninety definitions are given in chapter 2 of Bell and Newby's *Community Studies*. They include simple and complex deliniations by territory or area, by ethnic origin or belonging, by shared perspectives, work, interest or culture. They all have one thing in common, man. We are told that what finally binds a community together is a state of mind on the part of its members, a sense of interdependence or loyalty (D.W. Minar & S. Green *The Concept of Community*, page 60). The dichotomous approach of the Gesellschaft-Gemeinschaft continuum revolves less around place than around the degree of involvement of human beings. Below the surface of the community concept lurks a value judgment of what constitutes a good life, and sometimes we may forget that we ourselves as observers have our own difficulties and tend to point our noses in certain directions. Community studies require ears and eyes and qualities of analysis all of which have their human strengths and weaknesses (A.J. Vidich, J. Bensman and M. Stein *Reflections on Community Studies*).

Community involvement and effectiveness therefore relies heavily on human factors and the more we may know about these the better equipped we may be to understand our work. In this paper I propose to argue that communities are composed of people and that anyone entering community work

has his or her own personal motivation to contend with and this may help or hinder his work according to the understanding of the choice before him. In particular I want to demonstrate how conflict as well as co-operation can be used to either impose limits or extend them, not only between individuals or within groups but also between groups.

Richard Sennett in his book *The Uses of Disorder* becomes deeply involved in the many contradictions of opposing forces pulling in different directions a) within the individual, b) between individuals, c) between individuals and society and d) within society itself, that is between various groups and overlapping identities in society. He points out how modern society cramps the development of human beings, leaving them suspended in perpetual adolescence, encouraging their baby-dreams in adulthood, leaving them encapsuled in early childhood even. On pages 54 to 57 he follows the development of family life and its effect on our sense of group belonging:

'In the last half century a majority of the ethnic groups in the city have achieved a state of prosperity for themselves far better than the first immigrants ever dreamed of' (he writes about America). 'This upward movement in material wealth has been matched by social withdrawal where in the older forms of complex association have been replaced by a simpler kind of contact structure. This new pattern is embodied in the

growth of a specially strong and intense family life. To understand why the old pattern of multiple contact points died one needs to know what kind of power this new family life possesses . . .

‘The popular stereotype that city conditions somehow contribute to the instability of the home, or threaten the security and attachment that members of a family feel for each other, where father drinks too much, the kids turn to drugs, divorce is rampant, and nervous breakdowns are routine, that the good old rural families by contrast are loving and secure, are a popular myth. It simply isn’t true. Talcott Parsons has amassed evidence to show that the rate of divorce and desertion was much higher in the ‘good old days’, at the turn of the century, than it is now. William Goode has shown that divorce is less frequent in affluent homes than in working class homes. On the contrary, we can see that we are at a juncture of great formal stability with deep and unresolved tensions that now mark these families, and formal stability with deep and unresolved tensions that now mark these families, and it is these families that have come to hunger after a mythic idea of social solidarity’.

On page 93 Sennett goes further in what to me is a classic and seems to go right against all the candy floss image we so often have of our society from the visual media:’ . . . I would argue that the vision of society without pain can never be; in fact such visions now often lead revolutionary leaders to create what their ideologies abhor, namely even more pain and oppression than there was before . . .’ Pain and death are concepts that few can tolerate with equanimity, or face and deal with effectively.

On previous pages Sennett talks about

self-deception mirrored in community myth. The feeling of community identity, as described by Riesman and Znaniecky, can be a counterfeit experience. People talk about their understanding of each other and of the common ties that bind them but their common image are not true to their actual relationships. The lie they have formed as their common image is a usable falsehood, a myth, for the group (p.38). One striking example of such a community was made a decade ago by Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman who went to live in and study a small town in New York State. They found that people of this community had lives split between pursuits in towns and pursuits in a nearby large city; they found that community participation and decision making in the town were shared by only a small number of people; they found that such social forces as class, ethnic background and age play a decisive role in cutting off contrasts between people in the community. And yet, the people in this town voiced a strong, almost desperate belief in themselves as a unified group with warm and sustained contacts between all members of the town community.

Projections of community solidarity and self deception were found by Sennett in looking at a chain of events leading to the ousting of a prosperous black family from a wealthy suburb outside a mid-western city. In this suburb the rate of divorce was about four times the national average, the rate of juvenile crime began to approach the worst sections of the city to which it was attached, the incidence of hospitalisation from emotional collapse was frequent. Yet the people of the community united in a great show of force to drive the black family from its home three days after it had moved in because the residents said, among other things, that ‘we are a community of solid

families' and 'we don't want the kind of people in who can't keep their families together'. 'This is a happy, relaxed place' one resident said 'and the character of the community has to be kept together'. The importance of this incident isn't simply that the residents of the suburb lied, but why they lied in this particular way.

So we ask why. There are many interrelated reasons and circumstances and any analysis is likely to unearth only a few. Before looking into the contradictions within the individual himself I would like first of all to look into the group analytic situation. In group work a great deal of self deception can come to the surface, can be exposed, sometimes cruelly so, and each individual can be faced with his own contradictions. The group gives each member permission to be honest and when this gradually sinks in it can be learned just as readily as dishonesty and self-deception can. So much so that perhaps it can become a new cloak behind which to hide one's inability to deal with such new-found contradictions as may be labelled 'weak' or 'inadequate' or somehow not fit into the established norms one has of oneself, leading to new stress and confusion. New group-sanctioned behaviour patterns can create new problems, but they can also offer a new choice, new alternatives.

Eventually the gulf widens between those who have seen 'the light', who have had a personal analysis or attended group sessions and those in the rest of the community who have not, who don't even speak the same language. In America I noticed this particularly in California last year where the gulf between the ordinary business man or shop keeper and the 'groupie' is even wider than it is here, it seemed to me.

The projection of 'us' and 'them' -

coherent social realism - links the feeling of communal solidarity to the patterns of avoidance learned in adolescence. Certain tools of avoidance used by human beings to deal with crises in their own growth patterns are subsequently transferred to the way they understand themselves as a social being. This illusion is retained by adolescents caught by the desire for a purified identity. Communally painful experiences, unknown social situations full of possible surprise and challenges are transmuted into an illusion of solidarity and permanence. Finding the differences between oneself and the world outside seems to be much more difficult to bear than finding the points of similarity. The fear of 'otherness' is exactly of a piece with what men fear about themselves. From adolescence people take the power for myth-making into their adult community lives to blunt the conscious perception of 'otherness'.

'The myth of solidarity in community life speaks to a more complex human problem than social conformity (says Sennett, pages 41-42). Usually discussions of conformity to mass values and mores have treated the human beings involved as being, at their very worst, passive creatures manipulated by an impersonal system. Thus there is supposed conformity without pleasure, mindless obedience to the norms. This is much too flattering a picture of the human impulse at work.

'When the desire for communal sameness is understood as the exercise of powers developed in everyday life, rather than as the fruit of some abstract creature called 'the system' or 'mass culture', it is inescapable that the people involved in this desire for coherence actively seek their own slavery and self-repression. They would be insulted if the issue were stated so bluntly, of course; yet it is their

acts, their impulses that create the communal forms. The social images do not materialise out of thin air; they are made by men because men have learned in their individual lives, at one stage of development, the very tools of avoidance of pain later to be shared together in a repressive, coherent, community myth.'

Dr. A.T.W. Simeons in *'Man's Presumptuous Brain'* (E.P. Dutton and Co.) contributes the conflict within man to the struggle between the intellectually reasonable cortex and the instinctive diencephalon at the base of the brain which latter prompts reactions of flight and fight quite often in opposition to the cortex when there is no reasonable basis for such reaction. Sigmund Freud's own categories of the Superego suppressing the Id and tutoring a reluctant Ego is on similar lines of conflict, though Simeon lays more stress on the evolutionary backwardness of man from the medical-historical point of view, and he shows how instinctive body reactions lead to serious psychosomatic disorders when the reasonable cortex-directed actions of the body are directly opposed to instinctive preparation instigated by the diencephalon. Freud's Superego may tell man that he is free of his struggles for survival but the underlying fear remains fortified by the parental conditioning that perpetuates fear and inadequacy. Man may think (cortex) himself free of animal limitations and take solace in his ability to reason it all out, but the evidence is different.

I think it is now beyond argument that we are all subject to this conditioning and I don't have to comb the literature to substantiate this claim. However, it may be useful to focus on that part of our attitudes that may help or hinder us in becoming socially adjusted and useful and which are particularly relevant in our

relationships with each other and to other groups.

Various schools have argued the relative importance of the sociological and biological influences in our lives (Sherif's Bionergetic vs. sociogenic motives) and Peter Berger in chapters 4 and 5 of *'Invitation to Sociology'* bases the whole concept of the study of society on the study of man and his interaction with his environment. Freud himself admitted that we are biologically not suited to our society by having to repress hidden instincts and aggressions in order to be liked by our fellow men, or at least not totally rejected. I would like to illustrate how displacement and redirection of these basic drives not only effects the physical wellbeing of man, in his body, but also effects his ability to work with other men and with other groups of men.

In *'The Non-Directive Approach to Group and Community Work'* T.R. Batten analyses both the directive and non-directive approach but says little about the type of person who would be willing to try one rather than the other. To be able to accept the process of non-directive leadership which, being a contradiction in itself, has been renamed in various other ways as facilitating or acting as catalyst, to be able to play this role the community or group worker needs to be able to put himself in the background, to accept leadership by invitation, to put his own personality needs sometimes in abeyance. And this can be directly contrary to the original motives which have propelled the worker to enter this field, just as a teacher is motivated by teaching and is less motivated whether learning in fact takes place.

to be continued next month