

Four different approaches to community participation

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Abstract This paper explores some of the politics of community work by examining four basic *community participation* approaches. Moving from the right of *politics* to the left, it overviews some of the different theoretical orientations, goals, processes and recruitment practices that are commonly used but not always recognized to constitute different forms of *community participation*. Offered primarily to 'lay' community members, students and beginning practitioners, the paper is intended to clarify some of the differences that emerge when participation projects are designed, and to stimulate discussion about community participation more generally.

Introduction

In this article, the politics associated with community work are explored, before the purpose and utility of community participation of four approaches are articulated. Key elements of the approaches include: (1) anti- or reluctant communitarians and economic conservatism; (2) technical-functionalist communitarians and managerialism; (3) progressive communitarians and empowerment; and (4) radical/activist communitarians and transformation. Although there are potential points of overlap, the approaches are enunciated for heuristic – or explanatory – purposes. Closing the paper are brief comments relating to how one might decide upon which approach to adopt.

The politics of community work

The word 'community' is an umbrella term that is defined and applied in a myriad of ways. For instance, it may be used to refer to *geographic communities* where members are based in one region (Ife, 2002; Twelvetrees, 1982); or *virtual communities*, where members' main form of contact is through electronic media (Ife, 2002). *Communities of circumstance* constitute

another possible form of community. Such communities might emerge, for example, when bushfires or floods occur across different regions and those most affected feel connected to one another (Marsh, 1999). Finally, there are *communities of interest*, where identity groups form to lobby government for some kind of policy change and/or sponsorship (Kenny, 1999). While gay and lesbian groups are an example of this, so are business lobby groups.

Central to any discussions about how community members might be engaged are the questions: What is community participation, and what purpose(s) might it serve? (Holsen, 2000; Popple, 1995). Far from self-evident, these questions point to a series of other potentially complex questions that include, how communities are identified, the forms of communication used, the ways in which different communities inter-relate and whether some communities or sub-sections of a community dominate the others.

Thinking about who is constituted as 'the community' and how 'the community's interests are understood is critical, at least for people interested in the operations of power. Reflecting on how community participation is envisaged, who is included and who is left out, is also worthwhile. So is ascertaining whether the ownership of land/property is central to accepted notions of community participation; and if it is, whether this is fair? Other questions relating to justice and democracy include identifying whether different community activities are accorded lesser value because of the people who perform them. For instance, if the work is done by women, does it get less esteem (see Dixon, 1991; Young, 1990)? Understanding how conflicts of interest are interpreted and whether particular interests are (even inadvertently) prioritized are also part of the equation (see Laverack, 2001). So too, are the ways in which resources are allocated and the language used to represent the work. For example, are valuable projects not getting funded because they are not framed by terms that are currently fashionable (e.g. social capital)?

The politics of community work also involve figuring out which perspective(s) usually prevail, and how counter-positions are treated (Ife, 2002). With this, it is worth considering how decision-making usually occurs. If some community members dominate, what does it mean for others? Related to this are the goals of the work; goals that produce objectives, which – at some point – are likely to be used when projects are evaluated. Community work that receives some form of state support is especially likely to be evaluated. While evaluation produces many sets of questions, the first questions involve understanding how it will be conducted and by whom? It is also worth trying to ascertain before the work takes place whether there is any room to negotiate the terms of reference used, including whether the evaluation will investigate how regional, state, national and/or global

strategies are 'articulated' by the work (see Pettus, 1997; Packer, Spence and Beare, 2002).

These ideas are important given the diversity of meanings and applications of 'community', and associated concepts of community building, community partnerships and participation have worked their way into the official discourses of many public – *and private* – corporations (see for instance, Western Mining Corporation, 2002). It is particularly important that community facilitators adopt a critical understanding of these terms, considering, as Ife (2002) points out, that they are often (over) used to signify relatively nebulous and contradictory activities and practices.

As tempting as it might be, it is, therefore, not enough to use a sanitized definition of community and then 'move on'. For instance, it is not enough to suggest that community 'basically' refers to the in-(and)-between spaces that connect individuals to societies, or the intersections of 'the public' and 'the private' and/or the places where institutions can intervene 'for the good of society'. Further inquiry is necessary precisely because communities occupy the borderland between public and private domains (Birkeland, 1999). Definitions of community need to be explored because many societies have been influenced by the West's tendency to prioritize private profit over public need, individuals over societies, 'the private sphere' over 'the public sphere', 'man' over 'nature' and 'experts' over 'the public' (Birkeland, 1999; Ife, 2002; Young, 1990, 1997).

Anti-/reluctant communitarians and economic conservative approaches

While it might seem unusual to wonder how anti-communitarians define community, it is worthwhile to do so given that people from this end of the political spectrum often use references to community to argue against state intervention. For instance, it is not unusual for some people – including those who are high ranking officials and directors – to disparage community as a 'mythical netherworld' that no longer exists (if it ever did). At the same time, it is not uncommon for them to conjure the idea that human needs will be taken care of by 'the community'. Often scorning it for being a 'motherhood concept', such proponents often engage in a double move. First they associate community with sentimentality and softness – aspects of life that are out-of-step with the 'rough and tumble' of the (post)modern, individualistic and economic 'rationalist' world (Ellis, 1998). Then they tend to take for granted the existence of community supports.

By extension, many anti-communitarians see community work as 'not real work'; that if it must be done, should be carried out by well-meaning volunteers (usually women) (Young, 1997). Often members of this 'camp'

criticize community projects for interfering with the rights of individuals and/or the priorities of business. Having faith in top-down decision-making processes, they often reiterate the utility of a 'strong leader' – one who can make 'the hard decisions' (Ife, 2002). There are, however, other reasons why even the hardest critics of community work might 'concede' to it being undertaken. For instance, they may do so because they hope to use it to (a) circumvent opposition; (b) secure government sponsorship to maximize private profit and/or (c) generate good public relations.

Economic conservatism and some forms of liberalism are the orientation of most anti- or reluctant communitarians. While volunteers are expected to perform community work in the 'private realm', when landowners, corporate managers and (scientific) 'experts' stress the need for community work in the 'public realm' the focus is on instrumental (task-focused) processes (Ife, 2002). Forms of participation are usually brief and narrowly focused on goals, most of which revolve around economic interests (see for instance, Western Mining Corporation, 2002). Often, cost-benefit analyses are used to decipher whether a project, service or programme should proceed, with people usually described as (individual) consumers rather than citizens (Ife, 2002). Communities that do not contribute to profit-making activities are usually ignored (Mullaly, 2002). Yet, many anti- or reluctant communitarians lobby governments to provide business with tax 'incentives' and other subsidies. Often arguing for self-regulation rather than government legislation (Birkeland, 1999), some even stylize consumers' interest in 'green issues' into profitable 'green products and lifestyles' (Hawthorne, 2002). Given its philosophical base, it has very little correlation to justice or social and environmental sustainability.

Technical-functionalist communitarians and managerialist approaches

A second way of defining 'community' is to see it as a body of relatively stable, harmonious, homogeneous and connected collectivities. Often using the biological metaphor of 'maintaining equilibrium', those who subscribe to this approach usually see community engagement as important but not something that should disrupt the operations of capital.

Communitarians with a technical or functionalist orientation are usually informed by the philosophies of utilitarianism, pragmatism, rationalism and/or some forms of liberalism (see Birkeland, 1999). Usually their main goals are to determine 'optimal solutions' with minimal 'fuss' and maximum 'efficiency'. In turn, they seek to institute policies and programmes that are 'scientifically proven' to work, which usually means

that they maintain the current social order, irrespective of whether they 'mean to'. Sometimes this is done even when references to justice are made but placed well down the list of priorities (Verspaandonk, 2001).

Using the notion of pluralism and often seeing themselves as objective arbiters of conflicting interests, they may also help to negotiate 'trade-offs' and settlements. Not averse to overseeing change processes related to 're-structuring', 're-aligning' and 're-organizing', many try to 'standardize' decision-making processes. Often the consequences of such processes – whether intended or not – are unfairly weighted towards those with a great deal of social status, rather than those who have little.

Ignoring the possibility that injustice is woven into social structures – including those used to facilitate community participation – advocates of technical-functionalism believe the ideal role for government is to negotiate a plurality of interests through systematic forms of governance (Mullaly, 1997). Using managerial community work approaches, expert accounts of 'the public interest' are usually evoked. Similar to the anti- and reluctant communitarians, they usually concentrate on individuals and families, in particular geographical locations, and often those located in the middle and upper classes.

For many who adopt this 'apolitical' stance, community work tends to be de-politicized as work that does not necessitate the negotiation of differences and conflicting interests. As a result, questions of justice are routinely diminished, if not avoided (Ife, 2002). At times when this is not possible, justice is ordinarily understood to relate mostly to individual rights. Usually rights centre on individuals having major jurisdiction over the property that they own (Pettus, 1997) or their familial 'dependants' (Bishop, 2002).

Participation usually revolves around expert-driven consultations with community 'stakeholders' (including market research). Prominent office bearers and their subordinates often use community participation as a way to get others to ratify the views of 'experts'. Chosen experts are usually those who use technical solutions to solve (what are arguably) political problems (Mullaly, 2002). In the area of environmental sustainability, this approach may be 'softened' to include those activities that unsettle some land ownership conventions. However, they fall well short of attempts to reduce consumption and reform the social order.

Participants are usually recruited through well-established and well-respected community groups. Because people who use this approach tend to ignore the politics of the work, they often recruit people on the basis of personal style rather than ideology. Frequently this means that they seek out others similar to themselves. Because of their attraction to authority and order, 'reasoned debate' (mostly through written documents

and website displays), carefully staged public forums run by politicians and 'their' bureaucrats and public inquiries conducted over relatively long periods of time are often the preferred methods of technical-functional communitarians (Hollick, 1995).

Ultimately reliant on top-down forms of governance (including compulsory, competitive tendering systems and other highly regulated forms of community work) (Hollick, 1995), they may, nevertheless, posture as open and democratic. Sometimes this appears when they 'out-source' some of the work to community groups, especially those that can do it 'for less'. With access to state resources and often, direct lines to mainstream media, they are often keen to advertise 'success stories' of community participation through news reports, newsletters and brochures.

The advantages of this approach hinge on the clear lines of authority and standardized forms of working. Also, because of its espoused neutrality, efficiency and erasure of conflict, this model is often seen to be attractive by state authorities (such as local councils and provincial governments), large social welfare organizations (especially those that are church-based) and established charitable trusts. However, with little vision, place for diversity, or attention to power relations, it has a very limited capacity to ensure that socially and environmentally sustainable practices are incorporated 'across the board' (Birkeland, 1999).

Progressive communitarians and empowerment approaches

Progressive communitarians are broad constellations of people who tend to conceptualize the term 'community' as neither innocent nor suspect, but as a code word that signifies the (temporal) possibilities of collectives sharing resources and decision-making to address social and environmental problems, across national borders (see Bishop, 2002; Ife, 2002; Pettus, 1997). For this group, social justice is important, particularly where the direction of the work and the types of process instituted are concerned (Lee, 1986; Kenny, 1999). However, while justice is linked to both environments and people (Ife, 2002), there may be more emphasis placed on incremental reforms than structural change.

From this set of perspectives, the ideal role for government is to facilitate social and environmental sustainability through a mix of re-distributive and procedural forms of justice (Young, 1990, 1997; Henriks, 2002b, 2002c). Often informed by a wide mix of ideas produced by liberal humanism, eco-feminism, post-modernism and (some forms of) post-colonialism, the main goals of community work is to devise policies and programmes that balance social needs and well-being with environmental protection; and

address the impact of social inequality (see Kenny, 1999; Washington, 2000). For the most part, however, this is done without many criticisms made about the impact of multi-national corporations on communities and the expansion of global capitalism.

Nevertheless, many progressive communitarians talk a lot about (bio) diversity, cultural differences and the politics of inclusion/exclusion (Birkeland, 1999; Washington, 2000). Some do so from well-recognized positions in the trade union movement, women's movement, gay and lesbian rights groups, local environmental groups and people connected to Aboriginal Affairs. Others do so from universities and government utilities. Believing that power can be relational and productive as well as coercive and possessive, many are hesitant, if not loath, to use terms such as patriarchal capitalism because they fear they will oversimplify complex situations or overstate patterns of dominance (Healey, 1999). As a result, reservations are often expressed about describing people as 'powerful' or 'powerless' (see Healey, 1999). Espousing the need for more 'creative' and 'lateral' connections, they are also known to create unorthodox alliances across groups that otherwise are not seen to have much in common (see Young, 1990, 1997).

Egalitarian, democratic and inclusive in orientation, progressives who use empowerment approaches to community participation often personalize the connections they make with others and try to negotiate differences and/or conflicts. Using face-to-face interactions as well as electronic debates, forums, consultations and juries, empowerment-oriented community workers conduct research; create and implement plans, including plans to become involved in large-scale protests and contribute to wider policy and programme discussions (Henriks, 2002a; Weil, 1996). Hoping to affirm a sense of common connectedness and allow for a more active citizenry (see Henriks, 2002a), they often try to enable community groups to operate with some degree of autonomy.

However, while advocates of the progressive/empowerment approach might hope that all members of communities will participate in their activities, they do not necessarily ensure that such participation will be worthwhile for non-professionals from the 'wrong end of town'. Often because sufficient trust has not developed with under-resourced and under-represented citizens, many who use these approaches are forced to rely on participation from members of established community groups (Hollick, 1995). What this means is that some citizens' groups may remain under-represented, especially those who identify as Indigenous; are classified as 'ethnic minorities'; are young, gay, lesbian, un(der)-employed and/or reliant on public welfare benefits (see Ife, 2002; Kenny, 1999; Mullaly, 1997, 2002).

Furthermore, because this approach emphasizes complexities and takes risks forming alliances with other groups that do not necessarily share its value base, it is vulnerable to being hijacked by dominant groups' interests and agendas. Empowerment approaches are also potentially problematic for talking about inclusion and diversity but facilitating participation that does little to remedy extreme forms of social disadvantage and/or environmental destruction.

Criticisms aside, however, progressive/empowerment approaches to community work do maintain a focus on justice and are compatible with the philosophy of social and environmental sustainability (see Chamala, 1995; Brown, 1996). Amenable to bureaucrats with progressive leanings and other state office bearers, they may be used to garner resources and institute rulings for 'ordinary people'; people who otherwise might be at risk of exclusion (see Curtis and Van Nouhuys, 1999; Laverack, 2001). Also, because they adopt more 'nuanced' (or subtle) understanding of power relations, they have the capacity to deal with anomalies and contradictions without becoming rigid or dogmatic. And finally, because they are often less ambitious, they may be more attractive to people who have little faith or interest in 'completely overhauling the system'.

Radical/activist communitarians and transformative approaches

From a radical/activist vantage point, communities tend to be esteemed because they are places where 'ordinary folk' – especially folk concerned about discrimination, oppression and environmental degradation – can meet to discuss common problems and issues (see Global Exchange, 2003; Lee, 1986; Mullaly, 2002). For some, communities serve as refuges from aggressive, competitive individualism; they are sites of human identifications that help subjugated people to survive (Bishop, 2002).

Often associated with anarchists, Marxists, Fabians, socialists, more radically inclined feminists and others who use ideas from critical theory, this set of approaches has long been described by antagonists as dangerous, unworkable and/or 'too' idealistic. Mostly, this is because they do what progressive/empowerment advocates avoid, that is, to prioritize activities that seek to radically transform the global socioeconomic order (Birkeland, 1999; Mullaly, 1997, 2002).

Yet, what does it mean to 'radically transform the global socioeconomic order'? In terms of goals, it usually involves linking personal issues to those that are local, national and global. This is done in all areas of life where people are oppressed, alienated and excluded from full participation. For most radical activists, it means demanding that resources be

re-distributed on the basis of need not profit-making. For many it involves protesting against the World Trade Organization, for wars to end, for the West to open its borders to refugees (see Global Exchange, 2003; Free the Refugees Campaign, 2003). It also means fighting against poverty – poverty that mostly has a feminine and Aboriginal face – and demanding the right to fair pay and working conditions. For most, these interests do not stop at national borders but are considered globally. Most, if not all, participate in strikes, boycotts and other forms of activism to agitate for the rights of workers across the globe who are exploited through the absence of labour laws or through labour laws that allow for ‘sweatshops’ and outwork (see Fairwear campaign, 2002).

For environmental radicals, transforming the global social and economic order means opposing the stimulation of demand and consumption and transforming the future use of natural resources, not just beautifying local neighbourhoods with tree planting days or the like (see Carrere and Lohmann, 2003; Hawthorne, 2002). Calling for the West to account for its control and (over)use of the world’s resources and trying to institute ‘truly’ sustainable practices (see Ife, 2002) often means ‘seriously’ reconsidering prized lifestyles (such as car use) that are destructive of community environs.

Working with ‘developing nations’ to adopt ‘radical’ forms of social and environmental sustainability, radical/activist communitarians prioritize campaigns that promote vastly different policies, programmes and practices (Birkeland, 1999). Often because of their frustration with the current system, they prefer adversarial forms of advocacy (especially for legislative change) and ‘direct actions’, such as street protests, strikes, sit-ins, black-bans and boycotts (see Global Exchange, 2003). However, most also use educational campaigns, learning forums and consciousness-raising groups, to discredit global capitalism and all that is associated with it (see Hawthorne, 2002).

With power relations placed at the forefront of all their analyses, radical/activist communitarians still tend to speak of power in the possessive sense (for instance, ‘having power’ or having power taken away). While some radical/activists do this without reflection, others strategically classify individuals, groups and communities as powerful or powerless to garner attention, crystallize the main issues and point to ‘the way forward’. Usually aligned with ‘powerless’ groups and exploited locales (Ife, 2002; Lee, 1986; Pettus, 1997), many note how institutions use community ‘development’ to wallpaper over inequalities and colonize ‘grass-roots’ organizations (see Dixon, 1991).

For some radical/activists, community participation used by state authorities is seen to be a chimera (or smokescreen) to the ‘real’ issues of injustice; issues that are not dealt with in structural ways but are instead,

illusions of progressiveness that domesticate alternative views and re-align them with the interests of patriarchal and neo-colonial capitalism (see Sandercock, 1994). In turn, some see institutional attempts to 'build communities' to diffuse class conflicts and wallpaper over patterns of inequality and exploitation. As a result, this constellation of perspectives are often shunned or disparaged by governments, state authorities and businesses for being too 'radical' and uncompromising.

Preferring processes that are bottom-up, participatory in the 'true sense of the word' and consensus-oriented, many try to create democratic work groups and other processes where each member has the opportunity to steer the direction of the work. Conflicts of interest are often discussed – frequently through heated debates – and voting by the 'plebiscite' may be used to settle differences. While older radical/activists often still prefer face-to-face meetings, younger members are usually Internet savvy and willing to debate issues and make plans electronically. Irrespective of how they forge ties with one another, because their work is ambitious and since most of it occurs against the grain of social conventions, victories are usually partial. To sustain momentum, 'success' is often measured through the number of protesters and spirit of the demonstrators, rather than whether the actions led to a reversal of policy. That said, not all experiences of participation are remembered as pleasurable.

Nevertheless radicals/activist communitarians may be commended for their attempts to recruit people who are, ordinarily sidelined from public policy debates; people who are otherwise understood to not possess the requisite education, skills, time or motivation to be 'active' citizens (Bishop, 2002; Thorpe and Petruchenia, 1992). Ordinarily, this work is difficult because it involves engaging people who *may* feel quite alienated by formal politics, have internalized responsibility for the injustices they suffer and/or react with hostility towards others who foster hope for large-scale social change (Mullaly, 2002). Yet, many radicals/activists expend this energy because they hope to 'walk the talk' and 'practise what they preach'. Many try to live their ideals in everyday life, sometimes, through relinquishing privileges that are unfairly derived and forsaking opportunities that could involve them becoming 'co-opted by the system'. Having said this, professional expertise may be used but mostly when it is provided by 'comrades'. Often this is not done for payment but for 'the good of the cause'.

Although most radical/activist communitarians retain a deep commitment to redistributing resources, some social movement participants are now referred to as 'postmaterialist'. As Sekhon (1996, p. 1) notes, '[A]nti-authoritarianism, emancipatory egalitarianism, and social-democraticism, are all values under the umbrella of postmaterialism'. In other words,

materialism is not the only focus for activism. For many who hold post-materialist values, there is likely to be some cross-over with ideas and practices used by progressives, who endorse empowerment approaches (see Leonard, 1997; Young, 1990, 1997).

So, what are the advantages of conceptualizing community participation from this type of approach? Mostly, they relate to attempts to tackle the 'hard' problems of injustice and environmental degradation. Focusing attention on 'big picture politics', this approach provides a very clear vision – or series of visions – of a more just and inclusive society (Mullaly, 2002). And for people who are really interested in social and environmental sustainability, it has a great deal to offer.

In terms of disadvantages, however, there is no doubt that this type of approach is ambitious and relatively difficult to institute, considering the profound changes required. Alienating many 'powerful' segments of society, it is also not attractive to many 'ordinary' people who remain unconvinced that there is a viable alternative to global capitalism. Nor is it appealing to those who do not want to link their local community activity to global politics. Offering only limited roles for state authorities and their professionals, it is also difficult for large bureaucracies to adopt, especially those influenced by electoral politics.

Choosing an approach to community participation

The question now to be asked is which model should be selected? Quite simply, the answer lies in the values one holds. For instance, if the highest values held are to be able to pursue profit, own property and have complete jurisdiction over that property, then the economic conservative approach is the obvious choice. With its rather simple logic and unequivocal focus on 'the economy', it also appeals to those who revere 'the individual' and are suspicious of 'the community'. However, if individual rights – particularly those relating to the accumulation of capital – are not so (over)valued, then this approach has little to offer.

Similarly, if one longs for 'order' (as defined by chains of command) and esteems the production of expert and technical solutions over those produced through local, 'lay' and 'native' knowledge, the technical/managerial approach is likely to be used. Again, it may be favoured for its 'realistic' (read: narrow) aspirations towards democracy and community. Not pretending to seek participatory forms of democracy and not shy of 'strong leadership', it offers a way to involve people disrupting the usual ways of 'doing business'. Avoiding conflicts, especially conflicts of interest relating to class, gender, ethnicity, race, religion and sexual orientation, it may be seen to be the 'pragmatic' choice.

For people who hold liberal humanist values (that is, they prioritize the individual over the community, maintain faith in hierarchy and capitalism but who aspire for greater levels of social inclusion, less poverty and some limits to environmental destruction), the choice may be to combine elements of the technical-managerial approach with some elements of the progressive-empowerment approach. Whether or not it is declared, this is the approach adopted by many orthodox community groups, state authorities, religious organizations and charities.

For groups that subscribe to progressive forms of politics but ones that do not require a radical restructuring of the global social order, the progressive/empowerment approach is the likely choice. With its modified property rights, interest in redistribution of resources and general endorsement of human rights, it has the capacity to pursue the goals of social justice and environmental sustainability. And with its interest in pursuing justice from within (but also against) the current system, arguably, it is this approach that is most accommodating of 'left-leaning' community workers employed in large, state-based institutions (see Laverack, 2001; Packer, Spence and Beare, 2002).

Alternatively, people who value notions of participatory justice and democracy over individual interests, and who 'long for a fairer world', are most likely to endorse the radical-transformative approach. Unashamedly interested in 'grass-roots' organizations, and unapologetically interested in how resources and decision-making processes are shared – or not shared – they are likely to embrace the idea of community but as they do so, adopt more critical readings of it. Understanding community to be a subset of nation state and global society, radical communitarians often see it as the site – or series of sites – that may be used to mobilize people over issues of fundamental concern. Stimulating these concerns for further action, they locate questions of justice centre stage. For them, it is the hallmark of whether community work is worth doing.

Summary

As Dixon (1991) argues, no consensus has been reached in relation to the goals of community participation. Yet, in many circles where people use its name, there is often little discussion about the politics entailed. This is curious given the term 'community' can be used for a wide range of purposes. With the revival and refashioning of concepts related to community, questions need to be asked about how particular community practices are being used. These questions are critical because they shed light on the great range of values and aspirations that advocates of community are likely to endorse. That is why I have enunciated four approaches to

community participation. Provided for explanatory purposes, these (potentially overlapping) approaches are designed to help bridge the 'theory-practice' opposition that so often ensues when people 'do community work'. As I have shown, no matter how much one claims to be 'apolitical', or even 'eclectic', the practice of community work is invariably bound up in questions about power, status and resources.

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