CHAPTER 9
Sociological Work in Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The gap between academic and applied/clinical sociology is well exemplified by an analysis of the sociological treatment of the concept of "community." This concept usually rates at least a mention in introductory sociology and social problems textbooks (Broom et al., 1984; Henslin, 1999; Sullivan & Thompson, 1988). But many sociological theory textbooks make no mention of "community," as indicated by the index and table of contents (Coser & Rosenberg, 1982; Perdue, 1986; Waters, 1994). Community discussions are largely limited to applied and clinical sociology books and journal articles (Alinsky, 1984a,b; Anderson, 1986; Bridger, 1997; Glassner & Freedman, 1979; Schultz, 1996; Straus, 1984).

Unfortunately, this results in little theoretical guidance for the work of applied or clinical sociologists. In many instances, community studies tend to be "ad hoc": community researchers often begin their work with few theoretical principles to guide them, and their generalizations are rarely used to inform further research by others. In the present chapter, I will attempt to draw together some of the principles about communities and community ventures that have appeared in the applied and clinical sociology literature, with the hope that some generalizations about community theory can be developed and may serve to inform future studies in the area. I will begin with a review of the manner in which the concept of community is used in the literature, and then proceed to discuss a variety of approaches to community work used in applied and clinical sociology.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE:
VARYING DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITY

Few community studies begin with a definition of community. Most simply go about their analysis of the topic on the presumption that the meaning of community is well understood and accepted. There are numerous ways in which "community" is understood, however, and approaches that may be effective with one type of community may not be appropriate with others.

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151
Communities are typically defined as "groups of people who share a common territory and a sense of identity or belonging and who interact with one another" (Sullivan & Thompson, 1988: 376; see also Fritz, 1985; Glassner & Freedman, 1979; Park, 1952; Taylor & Randolph, 1975). Some analysts distinguish between "natural" communities, which form automatically in social settings, and "intentional communities," in which members of a group come together for the precise purpose of forming a community (Broom et al., 1984:92–93; Fritz, 1985; Radekop, 1975). Religious communities or communes are classic examples. Since most sociological work with communities focuses on natural communities, intentional communities will not be considered in the present chapter.

A closer look at the definition given above reveals that there are three components in the concept of community: geographic ("share a common territory"), psychological (with a "sense of identity or belonging"), and social ("groups of people... who interact with one another"). In its purest form, therefore, a community is a group of people who share geography, psychological identity, and a social interaction pattern. As Fritz (1985:138) notes, "The clearest examples of communities in this sense of the term are villages, neighborhoods, and small towns." It has also been noted that communities are defined by their "stories"—the narratives that members of the community relate to others because they exemplify the characteristics that the community wishes to emphasize about itself (Bridger, 1997; Johnstone, 1990).

In preindustrial societies this definition was perhaps sufficient. Most "communities" probably did share all of these factors. Residential areas tended to be small; everyone knew everyone else and shared a common culture, value system, and style of living. As a result of these shared attributes, members also identified with one another, felt a sense of cohesion, and distinguished themselves, as a group, from other groups they encountered. In short, the concept of "community" is really a hypothesis, which proposes that geography, identity, and social interaction tend to vary together.

It is obvious that in modern, industrial, urban settings this is often not the case. Instead, the several dimensions of community frequently diverge from each other, resulting in several different types of community, depending on which dimension of the original concept the members share. Many residential areas are nothing more than a place to live, and residents may not even know those who live nearby, much less share a sense of identity with them. In contrast, they may feel quite close to members of an ethnic, religious, or professional grouping, even though these people may live at some distance from them (Broom et al., 1984; Henslin, 1999). It has even been noted that the Internet, with its highly nonterritorial character, may serve as a community for some people (Henslin, 1999). Conversely, neither is the geographic dimension totally irrelevant. Whether or not they wish to recognize it, persons who live near each other share common concerns in many respects. Public health and safety issues are obvious examples. Clearly, the three dimensions of "community" are variables, not constants. And sociological work in communities, if it is to be effective, must take into account these various dimensions.

Types of Communities

Since there are three major dimensions on which communities may vary, it follows that there may be three major types of communities, depending on the dimension that the members share: territoriality, sense of identity, or degree of social interaction. A description of each type is provided below. (See also Sengstock et al., 1999, for another discussion of these dimensions.)