

# TRANSCA

## COMMUNITY

### Why read this text...

The concept of community is widely used, yet not easily defined. It connotes commonality, as in shared locality or shared sentiments, interests or goals. Imagined as an interdependent social field, the concept of community invokes mores of commitment, obligation, solidarity, accessibility, identity and belonging.

To explore how educators invoke community, we must look to local usages – *Gemeinschaft*, *communauté*, *zajednica*, *fællesskab*, *koinótita*, or *κοινωνία*, and more. We must ask how municipal authorities, school administrators, teachers or parents wield these concepts in relation to pedagogical strategies and educational issues. What is the reach of such community concepts and what values, moralities or interests do they connote?

Recent debates in anthropology may prove useful for reflecting on what is stake when educators invoke concepts of community. Anthropological approaches can help teachers identify dominant discourses and explore how local versions of 'community' are promoted and enacted.

### Historical context

Social scientists have viewed community as a togetherness of the past (Tönnies 1957), as common behaviour (Frankenberg 1966), as a symbolic boundary (Cohen), as political solidarity (ethnic, local religious), or utopian future (Rapport 2007:76). Community is usually qualified in terms of locality, ethnicity, religion, class, occupation, sexual orientation, special interest, nationality, and even humanity (Cohen 1985). Community is scalable, moving easily from school class community to supranational world community.

With emphasis on an underlying logic of commonality, social anthropologists regarded communities as empirical entities, as bounded groups of culturally homogeneous people living in one locality. They saw the villages and tribes they studied as key structural units of social life (Rapport 2007:73). This shifted in the 1980s with Anthony Cohen's work, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985). Cohen understood community as an *aspect* of social life rather than a reified, bounded entity. For Cohen, community denotes a social milieu of belonging encompassed by a common symbolic boundary. This milieu is broader than family and kinship, yet more immediate than abstract 'society'. Beyond kin, yet not strangers, people are in more or less close association, related through, but not tied to or defined by, some uniformity or perception of commonality (Cohen 1985:15-20).

Turning to questions of meaning and identity, Cohen (1985) was interested in the meanings people attribute to the idea of community, in how community exists for them. He drew attention to how people evoke community, how they feel and act in relation to ideas of community, and how they bound community (Rapport 2007). He saw community as a symbolic construct, existing in the minds of people who distinguish themselves from members of other alleged communities (Cohen 1985:12). This does not mean people share the same ideas and sentiments, draw community boundaries in the same place or assign them the same meaning. Rather, symbols of community provide people with something to *think with*, the means to make meaning, and thus to express the particular meanings that community has for them (Cohen 1985: 19). Although people share certain ways of behaving (an Oktoberfest, a traditional Danish *frokost*), the meaning of these may vary considerably. As an aggregating device, community's achievement lies in sustaining diversity by encompassing variety and discord (Rapport 2007).



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In the Anglophone world, community comes with an aura of approval (Rapport 2007; Strathern 2014). Anthropologists study community because their interlocutors insist that community exists and has meaning for them. People tend to value community as a social milieu; they see community belonging as something positive, and may evoke community as a remedy for a range of social ills. For Rapport (2007), this aura of approval is problematic. When studying how community exists for people and what it means to them, it is important to distinguish between the often politicized, positive rhetoric and the potentially harmful everyday consequences of indiscriminate, positive applications of discourses of community (Rapport & Amit 2002). It is also important not to ignore mundane forms of disassociation, both intentional and nonintentional, that distance, break or end relations (Amit 2012b). To understand community, we must look at *which* relations people activate, invest in and reinforce and *which* they reduce, restrict or sever. We must attend to how people cut or break off relations (less time, more space), redefine them (colleague becomes friend), or how through tact and diplomacy (I've been so busy) deflect relational offers (Amit 2012b).

## a) Discussion

In a long-standing debate, two of Cohen's former students, Nigel Rapport and Vered Amit ask what the concept of community helps us understand about social life. Amit argues (2002b) that because the idea of community is in the world, i.e. people use it to designate some significant aspect of their world and experiences, we should not cast it aside but look closely at how it is deployed and learn from this. Rapport (2002b) argues that our analytical starting point should be individuals and groups, not community. He finds the concept of community problematic because it is often used to 'capture' people, to reify who they are and moralize about how they should associate. Both positions are useful for thinking about how people make community matter to themselves and to others.

Influenced by Benedict Anderson's (1991) work in the 1990s on imagined communities, focus shifted away from actual social relations to social imaginaries of community (Amit 2002a). To understand how dispersed populations imagine themselves as part of the same a nation bounded by other nations, Anderson questioned how people gain and maintain an emotionally charged sense of commonality, mutual identification and solidarity with a political community. Scholars of diaspora and transnationalism have deployed 'imagined community' to discuss how widely dispersed and displaced people create a sense of commonality and belonging. In Amit's view (2002a), they too often posit imagined communities as realities rather than as something to be found out.

Amit (2002a) cautions against equations of culture  $\approx$  ethnicity  $\approx$  difference  $\approx$  community grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions that community exists among a category of people. Relations between *imagined categorical identities* and *social groups* have to be accounted for, as externally defined ethnic categories of people defined by place of origin may or 'may not correspond with internally generated groups of identification and social relations' (Olwig 2010). To grasp any full, partial or lack of emotional pull of a community, we must explore how people deploy concepts, categories, and moralities of community, and which social categories (refugee women, African runners) mobilize *actual* social relations. We must also study the settings, circumstances, times, and social forms through which a *category* of people interacts as a *social group*. Community is not constituted or mobilized through mere acts of imagining or attributing; it takes work (Amit (2002a).

In the ongoing debate on human commonality and collectivity, Amit (2012) suggests that rather than struggling to define elusive concepts like community, we ought to focus on their 'strategic points of ambiguity', those defining points of concern about community that keep both scholars and laypeople questioning whether and how it exists. Arguing that community is 'good to think with,' Amit (2012a)



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identifies three points of ambiguity that lend themselves to exploring what community may entail in any given setting. *Joint commitment* points to questions of how and why people are committed, *affect and belonging* points to the feelings of commitment, mutuality and belonging people may have, and *forms of association* allows us to investigate how people associate with each other.

Amit cautions that we cannot not just assume community; we must account for it by investigating routine day-to-day practices of sociation. Rapport (2012) reminds us that human interaction and sociation is never perfectly aligned, as misunderstanding, miscommunication, and unintended consequences are always potential. Rather than the commonality of 'community', Rapport (2012) argues the commonplace of 'distortion' – the contingency, risk, and inherent unpredictability of human interaction as well as the creative, playful, ironic, random character of social exchange.

## b) Ethnographic Example

Moving Anglophone discussions of community to other language zones can be problematic. Often there is no corresponding word for community. Danish scholars gloss community as *fællesskab* (fellowship), *samfund* (society), or *gruppe* (group) and when writing in English, struggle to translate *fællesskab*, which though similar to community, does not mean quite the same. To understand 'community' as locally conceptualized and expressed, we must look to common, local terms that carry similar complexity and ambiguity (Olwig 2010).

Like community, *fællesskab* is a hurrah word. It is good for people, as all have a need to feel they are part of a larger whole (Anderson 2008). In Denmark, discourses of *fællesskab* are rife with morals of proper sociability and widely deployed in pedagogy, welfare politics, cooperative housing, voluntary associations and debates about national cohesion. *Fællesskab* refers to both a bounded entity and an *as-if-equal* sociability that creates a feeling of 'togetherness' among people, who share common interests and consociate in clubs, associations, schools, and as friends, neighbours and colleagues (Anderson 2008; Bruun 2011: 62-63). *Fællesskab* invokes cherished ideals of social fellowship, group-oriented sociability and sentiments of commonality, mutuality and solidarity, ideals used to characterize and assess the quality of relations between individuals and between individuals and some larger whole.

In her study of cooperative housing in Copenhagen, Bruun (2010) notes that Danish society is envisaged as a *fællesskab writ large* to which all citizens belong and to which all must actively contribute. As a dominant ideal, *fællesskab* is a prime nexus of negotiation and disagreement about what constitutes legitimate membership in a cooperative and how mutuality, commitment and sociability ought ideally be expressed. Bruun (2011) suggests that *Gemeinschaft*, with its connotations of bounded, small-scale togetherness, comes closest to the meaning of *fællesskab*. However unlike *Gemeinschaft*, *fællesskab* was never expected to give way to the onslaught of modernity (cf. Tönnies 1957), perhaps because *fællesskab* is a key mobilizing metaphor of the modern welfare state.

Like community, the notion of *fællesskab* is not innocent; it may be associated with and wielded by powerful interests. Boundaries may be demarcated by members or by others who imagine and value (or disparage) a *fællesskab's* existence (Olwig 2010:365). In her studies of Danish childhood, Anderson (2000, 2008) notes that both school classes and recreational sports are seen as relational fields in which children practice fitting themselves into a social *fællesskab*. Conceived of as playpens of democracy, these social arenas lend themselves to addressing, interpreting, and reflecting upon pedagogical concerns with sociability, mutual commitment and social cohesion (Anderson 2008). Yet whereas recreational sports are voluntary, school classes are involuntary. From day one, Danish



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comprehensive schools (grades 0-9) sort children into permanent classes of 18-28 children, bounded social enclaves in which they remain until they either graduate or change school. Growing up together as classmates, children are expected to get on such that, over the years, they forge a robust *klassefællesskab*. A class that manages this is deemed well functioning; a class that does not is labeled the school's 'worst class', the one most teachers hope to avoid (Anderson 2000).

To help children learn to 'be social' and to form a well-functioning *klassefællesskab*, teachers organize group work, common birthday celebrations, school-camps, class trips and play-dates, where parents welcome small groups of five or six children into their homes (Gilliam and Gulløv 2014). Whereas Danish children are evaluated on both academic and social prowess, class teachers are evaluated on their ability to forge a tight knit, harmonious *fællesskab* in which classmates together make "common decisions, tolerate each other's views and needs, cooperate towards common goals, settle disputes through joint effort, common rules and empathy with one another" while feeling social safe and "happy to express themselves" (Gilliam and Gulløv 2014: 10). School classes predicated on ideals and sociabilities of *fællesskab* are forceful regimes of upbringing, particularly for children who do not, cannot or will not 'fit into' the class at hand.

In the Danish pedagogical tradition, school-classes are viewed as microcosms of society. Schoolclass sociability is thought to prepare children to fit themselves into a wider societal *fællesskab*, 'out in the real world' at some future point. As Amit (2002a) reminds us, however, imagining and actualizing community (*fællesskab*) are two different things. Pedagogical ideals and ambitions do not correspond 1:1 with the sociality actualized by classmates on a daily basis, nor do they tell us much about what children make of this. We must therefore pay attention to how children forge 'communities' of cooperation or resistance, how they attach meaning to and bound these in ways that include or exclude particular others, not least their teachers.

## Thinking further:

1. Reflect on how concepts of 'community' are used in your school. How do you understand 'community', and how do you talk about it with others? What terms do you use? What values and moralities do you invoke? Are there disagreements or controversies over the idea of 'community', and if so what are these about?
2. How are ideas and mores of community taught to children at your school? Are there particular lessons, gatherings or events considered to inculcate ideas and moralities of 'community'? Reflect on how these might include or exclude particular children and their families.
3. Discuss whether notions of 'community' in your language come with an aura of approval or disapproval, and reflect on why this is. What concerns do people have about 'community' and how do they express these concerns? Which view of community dominates and why?

## KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Collectivity, sociality, commonality, belonging, ethnicity, nation-state

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