

Reading Tips and Study Questions
6. The nature of community in 21st century America:
networks, places, social capital

Required reading

1. **Robert Sampson**, "What community supplies," in *The Community Development Reader*.
2. **Chaskin**, "Building community capacity," *Urban Affairs Review* (2001).
3. **Chaskin and Joseph**, "Building 'community' in mixed-income developments," *Urban Affairs Review* (2010).
4. Selected pages, including "When your neighborhood is not your community," in **Briggs, Popkin and Goering**, *Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty* (New York: Oxford, 2010).

Recommended reading

Steven Brint, "Gemeinschaft revisited: A critique and reconstruction of the community concept." *Sociological Theory* 19(1), March 2001, pp.1-23.

Wenhong Chen and Barry Wellman, "Charting digital divides" and "Twitterology," NetLab, University of Toronto.

Session overview

This session is about the nature of community in a changing society. We will not only discuss the psychological "sense of community" but also what's called "community social organization"—the norms, relationships, and enduring institutions that help define shared community life. As with our other sessions, we'll aim to build a solid conceptual foundation that will let you explore a variety of cutting-edge topics over time, in this and other courses, such as the purposes of community organizing and the evolving role of social media.

"Community" is a much cherished concept—and also a widely used but very elastic term. By the late 1950s, observers had documented more than 80 distinct definitions of community in the English language alone, and all they seemed to have in common a foundation in some kind of "group."

"Community" is invoked routinely in political settings, among others, to serve a wide variety of purposes. For example, it is sometimes invoked as the anti-thesis of government (as in: if we allow bigger and more activist government, community will shrink and weaken). And it can often be exclusionary code language, of course, for "only people like us" or, more affirmatively, for "we did this together."

As for ties that make up certain kinds of communities, “friend,” to choose just one type, means different things to different people—only close confidants, acquaintances made at large gatherings and then sustained for mutual benefit, etc. And “friend” is now a verb, thanks to Facebook and other social media. But “friending” has only added to the wide-ranging, elastic quality of networks and “communities.” And the rapid emergence of the internet plus these add-on media over the past two decades has led to great interest in the analysis and shaping of networks, for security, marketing, “community building,” and other purposes. The formal scientific analysis of networks goes back at least 80 years. And the shaping of them is surely ancient.

There is more and more interest in “cyber-gaps.” Going beyond the issue of digital access by the poor or otherwise disadvantaged (the digital divide), for example, there is the question of how the use of the internet and social media *by all of us* contributes to or mitigates social inequality.

Community developers generally use “community” to invoke a rooted, specific sense of place: people’s attachments to a place, a geographic “catchment area” served by an organization, an ethnic group or groups settled (concentrated) in an “enclave” or other area, a developer’s name for a part of town (used to market the place), or all of these. And again, community labels and boundaries include but at the same time exclude. Community developers, just like companies or governments, bring agendas. They want to “harness” and “use” networks and other mechanisms.

Discussion questions

1. Why, according to **Sampson**, is the social control function of community so important, and why does it tend to depend on enduring institutions and not just informal activity, such as neighboring? What effects does Sampson indicate for the larger forces of “stratification” that we examined last week, including forces that drive spatial segregation by race and class?
2. In the short excerpt from **Briggs-Popkin-Goering** (read up to “Finding community” on p.119), the authors treat the community theme in the context of a housing demonstration program (Moving to Opportunity) that provided financial assistance specifically to enable low-income renters to relocate, on a voluntary basis, to low poverty neighborhoods. The researchers then met with those families, over time, to understand their choices, experiences, and outcomes. But the discussion of the meaning of “community” versus “neighborhood” (“when your neighborhood is not your community”) and family and other ties has a more general value for us.

Why, according to the authors, is it common for families to have few if any “strong” ties in their immediate neighborhood, how do kin and other strong ties

“displace” other kinds of ties, and why might a person or family benefit from ties that have built up in their neighborhood even if the person/family in question is not “tied in” there (locally) themselves?

3. How well do you think **Chaskin** has captured “community capacity” in his definition? Or the kinds of strategies that he argues might build it in a given (place-based) community? (For more detail, see his book with co-authors: *Building Community Capacity*, 2001.)
4. Why do **Chaskin and Joseph** focus on outcomes such as “social cohesion” and “social control” in their attempt to understand “community building” in mixed-income housing developments in Chicago? How appropriate does that focus seem, and how effectively do the local strategies they describe seem to promote those kinds of outcomes?

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