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# CHAPTER 1

## Defining Communities and Community Competence

To be effective, professionals in the human services need a conceptual and practical understanding of communities within American society. This book is designed to assist these professionals, especially social workers, in the development of a fund of knowledge and a systematic way of thinking about communities. Conceptual frameworks and empirical findings from the social sciences and social work, as well as information from journalistic reports in the mass media, are presented in this book. This knowledge about communities will contribute to the achievement of social service goals through social work practice.

### DEFINING COMMUNITIES

A community exists when a group of people form a social unit based on common location, interest, identification, culture, and/or activities (Garvin and Tropman, 1992). For the purposes of this book, communities are classified into three major groups. These groups are distinguished by common locality, or place, by non-place characteristics, and in terms of an individual's "personal community" (Davidson, 1986). Locality-based communities are characterized in terms of three dimensions: (1) a functional spatial unit meeting sustenance needs, (2) a unit of patterned social interaction, and (3) a symbolic

unit of collective identity (Hunter, 1975). Communities of "place" vary along these dimensions, as well as in terms of size, density, and heterogeneity. Locality-based communities are often referred to as neighborhood communities, community areas, local municipal communities, and metropolitan communities. Generally the population size and geographic area of these communities increase from the neighborhood community to the metropolitan community.

Locality-based communities are usually overlapping, such as neighborhood communities within municipal communities. Consequently, people generally reside in multiple communities of place, that is, communities within communities. While we give attention throughout this book to the various types of locality-based communities, our principal analysis of a community as a social system focuses on the municipal community—commonly referred to as a town, a city, or a suburban community—and on neighborhood communities. We use an ecological perspective to examine locality-based communities, with consideration given to the demographic development and social stratification of American communities. This is followed by a social systems perspective, which is guided by Warren's (1963) definition of community as "that combination of social units and systems which perform the major social functions having locality relevance." This definition of locality-based communities guides our examination of the major subsystems which carry out community functions.

In addition to membership in locality-based communities, many people belong to one or more "non-place" communities. These may be referred to as "communities of identification" and "communities of interest" (Longres, 1990; Garvin and Tropman, 1992). Identificational communities are based on some feature of common identity or belief, such as ethnicity, race, religion, lifestyle, ideology, sexual orientation, social class, and profession or type of employment. Thus, it is not uncommon to hear people refer to themselves as members of the African American community, the Asian American community, the Jewish community, the Catholic community, the Polish community, the Italian community, or the gay community. These communities are regarded as communities of interest, especially when members have a common identity and also engage in some level of organizational activity, such as happens in professional groups, sports clubs, religious groups, and ethnic organizations.

Locality-based communities, especially neighborhood communities, often coincide with identificational/interest communities. For example, people who identify themselves in terms of a common background of race, religion, national origin, or social class, may live in

residential areas which have a high proportion of people with one or more of these characteristics. In many large American cities, such as Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and Miami, the names given to community areas or neighborhoods are often associated with specific ethnic, racial, or religious groups.

A somewhat different use of the term *community* focuses on the membership of an individual in multiple communities. Thus an individual's "personal community" consists of all of the communities—locational, identificational, interest—in which one engages in social interaction, in use of services and resources, in employment activities, and in leisure time pursuits (Davidson, 1986). This definition of community broadens the scope of potential social interactions and social resources, including both formal and informal helping networks. With this formulation, the personal community serves as a context for the social worker's development of interpersonal treatment and social service intervention goals, as well as the goals of community practice which seek to change organizations and communities.

## DEFINING COMMUNITY COMPETENCE

The concept of community competence provides a framework for understanding the functioning of the various communities which make up the social environment. Community competence is a major attribute of a good community, as it consists of the capacity of a community to engage in problem-solving in order to achieve its goals. A number of "good" community qualities serve to enhance the creation of a competent community.

More specifically, a competent community may be defined as: "one in which the various component parts of the community are able to collaborate effectively in identifying the problems and needs of the community; can achieve a working consensus on goals and priorities; can agree on ways and means to implement the agreed-upon goals; can collaborate effectively in the required actions" (Cottrell, 1983). The idea of community competence is expanded upon by Barbarin (1981), who emphasizes that the capacities of social systems, and of the individuals and groups within a community, constitute a dual dimension of competence. In Barbarin's terms, "Community competence refers both to the ability of social systems to respond to differential needs of the varied populations they serve, and the ability of citizens or groups to use existing resources or develop alternatives for the purpose of solving problems of living."

**ENHANCING CONDITIONS OF COMPETENCE**

A number of conditions may enhance the competent functioning of a locality-based community. Some of these are individual or group attributes and behaviors, such as the degree to which: (1) residents have a commitment to their community; (2) there is a self-awareness among the various community groups of their own values and self-interests; (3) there exists a level of articulateness that allows for effective communication about community issues between the diverse segments of the community; and (4) residents participate in identifying goals and implementing them. Systems components often found in a competent community are (1) procedures for handling conflicts which arise between various groups in the community and (2) the capacity for managing extra-community relationships with the larger society, while at the same time maintaining an appropriate degree of local autonomy (Cottrell, 1976).

Another way of describing a competent community is to locate qualities which are valued in a community, qualities which are considered "good." For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. used the term, "beloved community" to "describe an ideal town or city, which would flourish without racism, poverty, or violence" (Logan, 1993). Most citizens would agree with this view of a good community. Still, community qualities are value-laden in that they may not be regarded as "good" by all residents. It can be expected that people share some values and interests and differ with regard to others. Examples of such values appear in Warren's discussion of "What is a good community?"

- People should deal with each other on a personal basis, rather than an impersonal basis.
- There should be a broad distribution of power within the community.
- The community should include a wide variety of different income groups, ethnic groups, and religious and interest groups.
- There should be a great deal of local neighborhood control.
- The community should encompass the greatest possible degree of cooperation in policy-making and the least possible conflict (Warren, 1980).

Warren (1980) raises the caution that few communities have all these desirable qualities at the same time. Thus, as people move to maximize the benefits of one community characteristic, such as autonomy, they may have to accept a reduction in benefits from other

areas, such as extra-local, state, or federal funds. Similarly, broad decision-making involvement in a community may not be compatible with effective, efficient, and timely actions on the part of the community's political system. The small size of a community may allow for primary group relationships that might be much more limited in large cities. Yet smaller size may also limit the potential for heterogeneity of community residents.

Finally, there may be times when fewer of these usually desirable community qualities might result in a more competent community. For example, Warren (1980) has alerted us to the potential benefits of apathy and ambiguity, especially on controversial issues which are extremely divisive. In Warren's words, "We need apathy. We need people who will clamp the lid on excessive partisanship." Furthermore, there may be times when groups are ambiguous about issues or unable to clearly articulate their differences. In such cases a level of ambiguity may allow for consensus on points of agreement, rather than an emphasis on disagreement, and thereby lead to community action rather than inaction or overt conflict.

**IMAGES OF A GOOD COMMUNITY**

As people think in terms of how good their community is, they develop images. These are based on objective characteristics of communities, as well as subjective opinions and feelings. These images may affect the way residents relate to each other, as well as their involvement in the informal and formal organizations of a community. A number of ingredients may contribute to an individual's positive "picture" or "image" of a community—for example, the opportunity for primary group relationships, the attachment of citizens to their community, the absence of serious social problems, the presence of solid, functional, safe neighborhoods, the presence of opportunities for education and employment, a positive physical and cultural environment. Many citizens describe a good community in terms of a "good place to live," a "good place to work," a "good place to raise kids," or a "good place to retire"—with each citizen having a somewhat different definition or image of what is "good," depending on personal factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, race, social class, sexual orientation, and religion.

Professional planners, politicians, and human service workers are likely to evaluate a community in terms of how goals are established and whether or not they are attained. For example, professionals may

consider a community to be competent when (1) its governmental officials determine priorities, such as controlling juvenile delinquency, drug traffic, violent crimes, civil disorders, creating new employment opportunities, building convention or sports facilities, and (2) when action is taken to obtain funding to undertake efforts to reach these goals. Thus, one measure of competence is the extent to which goals are actually achieved: Are social problems being controlled or reduced? Are United Fund campaigns successful? Are job opportunities created? Are occupational barriers for ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged people, disabled people, women, and gay and lesbian people reduced or eliminated?

The task of the human service professional is to understand the impact of the competence and "goodness" of the community on the social functioning of individuals, families, and small groups. The professional's role is to assist people in relating to their environment and effecting changes that will be beneficial to all community residents. Ideas about "good" and "competent" communities provide a context for identifying social practice goals and strategies. Obviously few, if any, communities are "ideal," or so "good" and "competent" that no social problems need solving and no individuals are in need of help in their social functioning. In responding to these problems and needs, social workers become more effective if they can identify and understand the factors which enhance or detract from the competence of a community.

## PLANNED COMMUNITIES

The ideas of "community competence" and "good community" are usually directed toward the evaluation of communities which have been functioning for some period of time. We are interested in the features of competence which make these communities work well, or which need improvement for better functioning for local residents. Social workers are especially concerned with ways to minimize or eliminate barriers to community competence for special population groups. Another approach to creating "better" and "stronger" communities is through the development of "new towns" or "planned communities." There are many historical examples of alternative communities—such as utopian communities, communes, garden cities—which emphasize the proximity of living together and the sense of shared values. Currently, there are a number of examples of planned communities in American society. These communities

represent the "images" of good communities on the part of urban planners, architects, and the people who choose to live in them. At the same time, many public-housing developments have become examples of communities with negative images and identities, especially when they have high rates of crime and violence and lack the social cohesion often found in traditional working-class neighborhoods.

Suburban communities developed from the late 1940s—for example, Levittown, New York, and Park Forest, Illinois—represent one model of a planned community. This model included increased household and area space, parks, schools, nearby commercial establishments, churches, and neighborhood associations. A somewhat similar development occurred in the creation of planned retirement communities, especially in states with mild climates, such as Florida, Arizona, and California. Newer versions of planned communities which have emerged in the 1980s and 1990s will be cited here as illustrations of attempts to create competent, good communities.

## Old-Style Towns

One example of the development of an old-style town is Rancho Santa Margarita, a community in Orange County, California, designed to include "medium-priced homes, shops, industry, and plenty of open space within a well-defined area, so people can get out of their cars and actually meet each other" (Hirsch, 1991). The goal of this community model is to "create a self-contained community where all activities—working, shopping, playing—are woven together like the strands of a spider web." At present the community population is about 15,000, with an anticipated population of about 45,000. The developers of this community have used ideas from urban planners and psychologists, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, to create a community which "looks at wellness as a lifestyle need." Priority is placed on affordable housing, shared open spaces, jobs, small yards, porches and patios, general stores, walking paths. As of 1991, this new town "is still more promise than reality," as it seeks to possess three major dimensions of community, that is, a geographic place which provides for sustenance needs, a high level of social interaction, and residents with a strong community identity.

Another example of old-style towns is found in community projects such as Seaside, Florida, developed by an architecture firm headed by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. Their image of a "good community" is one in which people are less reliant on cars, as

in many pre-World War II traditional neighborhoods (Morgenthaler, 1993). These architects advocate strict building codes, streets which diffuse traffic (not cul-de-sacs), a mix of commercial and residential areas, mixed housing and apartments, and mixed age and income residents. The ideal of this community model is for residents to have the option of shopping, eating, and working within walking distance.

### New Town Within a City

A rather different model of new town development is found in a proposal for a new semi-autonomous municipality within the City of Detroit, Michigan (Cannon, 1990). While some old buildings and homes would be preserved in a 740-acre area of the city, most of the area would be newly developed. The "new town" of about 7500 people would have its own mini-government, a Community and Development Enterprise Zone Authority, with control over its government, schools, and services such as police and fire departments. The development of this "new town" would require cooperation and resources of various levels of government, including the City of Detroit, the state, and the federal government. The overall goal would be to create "a community of mixed incomes, ages, and races with an independently run, first-rate school system," "a place where practical family values can flourish in an atmosphere free of drugs, prostitution, pornography, gambling, and other criminal activities" (Cannon, 1990).

A quite different model of a new community has been developed in Winslow, Washington, on Bainbridge Island. This is a village for about 70 people with co-housing rather than single units, designed by future residents, pedestrian-oriented, with privacy and substantial facilities shared by all the residents (Giese, 1990). Exemplars of this type of co-housing community can be found in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, France, and West Germany. The houses in Winslow are in the style of traditional Bainbridge farmhouses. All are attached and clustered in three neighborhoods, one with large units and two with one-bedroom apartments. There is a "common house" with dining options and meeting room, library, day-care center, and laundry, as well as a guest house. Each unit has a kitchen, but communal dining is an option. All decisions about the community are made by a consensus of the residents.

The various types of "planned communities" described here represent attempts to rebuild traditional community structures which are associated with characteristics of "good communities." Keep in mind these community types as well as more traditional and

emerging urban, suburban, and rural communities as you examine ecological and social systems perspectives for understanding communities in American society.

### ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVES

No single theoretical framework for understanding communities provides an adequate basis for practice by human service professionals. There are, however, two sets of theories which contribute to the study of communities: human ecology and social systems theory. These perspectives, which are well developed in the social sciences, are being widely used in social work circles in the conceptualization of the social environment (Germain, 1991; Meyer, 1983; Longres, 1990; Chess and Norlin, 1988). These "systems" approaches provide several kinds of knowledge about communities.

The *ecological system* perspective focuses on the population characteristics of a community (size, density, heterogeneity), the physical environment (land use), the social organization or structure of a community, and the technological forces in a community. The ecological perspective seeks to explain the salient features of population groups within a geographic area, such as social class, racial and ethnic composition, age structure, aspects of family composition, and division of labor within the community.

This perspective draws our attention to the interdependencies of people, services, and their local environment and to community interactions with other communities and the larger society. Of particular interest are patterns of spatial organization, e.g., the location of business and commercial areas, residential areas, health and welfare services, and parks. An ecological perspective also helps us understand community changes, such as movements of population groups, patterns of migration and immigration, succession and segregation, and the growth dynamics of communities. It provides a framework for judging when such changes are beneficial or detrimental to residents and the community as a system. From an ecological perspective a competent community enjoys a productive balance between its inhabitants and their environment, allowing for change in an orderly, nondestructive manner and providing essential daily sustenance requirements for its citizens.

The *social systems* perspective involves social institutions relating to one another within a community system, providing social functions of production/distribution/consumption, socialization, social

control, social participation, and mutual support for individuals and for the community as a whole (Warren, 1963). Special attention is given to the formal organizations which operate within the major parts of a community system, such as the economic, political, educational, and social welfare and health care subsystems of a community. The social systems perspective focuses on the interaction of these community subsystems on a horizontal level within a community and on a vertical, extra-community level. The conditions which enhance community competence can be viewed from a social systems perspective, with a focus on both the community system as a whole and the activities of the various social units which make up its subsystems. From this perspective, a good community is one where the various subsystems operate for the benefit of all citizens.

In exploring communities from these systems perspectives, one may look upon a community as an actor. Questions of when, how, and why communities act, and what environmental forces influence the ways in which they act, can be explored. How communities handle conflict, maintain or regain equilibrium, react to change, achieve community objectives, and satisfy their members are to be considered. The ways in which various social arrangements and organizations within a community operate need to be examined—in particular, the functions of primary groups and social institutions in serving community residents. Finally, knowledge about communities as systems becomes more meaningful when it is placed in an historical or developmental perspective and understood within a context of social change, trends, and projections for the future.

### **BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY COMPETENCE**

Competent communities are not easy to create or maintain. Sometimes communities are adversely affected by societal forces outside of their control, such as economic recessions and state and federal policies. Communities vary in the extent to which they have local resources, employment opportunities, organizational leadership, and sound educational, health, and social welfare programs and services. They also vary in their innovative capacities and their efforts to improve community conditions. One of the most significant barriers to community competence involves the values, attitudes, and practices of people toward special population groups. Thus, communities vary in regard to their level of discrimination, prejudice, oppression, acceptance, and tolerance. Many American communities lack an appropriate response to the "differential needs" of such groups as ethnic

minorities, women, physically and mentally disabled people, and gay and lesbian people. The greater the inequities in employment opportunities, health and social service resources, and social status, the less effective and functionally competent the community is with respect to its total population.

### **Barriers for Ethnic Minorities**

Institutional racism is a major force which fosters a lack of a community competence. As Longres has noted, "Racism can exist independent of the attitudes and beliefs of individuals. When it is built into the norms, traditions, laws, and policies of a society, racism is said to be institutionalized." Discriminatory policies and practices toward racial groups may be found in any of the subsystems of a community and may come in many forms: economic discrimination, insensitivity to the special needs of minorities, distorted characterization of minorities by the mass media, and provision of inadequate or inferior services to minorities (Longres, 1990).

Social workers need to recognize the barriers and limitations imposed upon minorities of color, especially when this occurs in human service organizations. As Barbarin has noted, an increase of community competence requires a twofold focus:

- an awareness on the part of community agencies about the cultural diversity brought to a community by different minority groups;
- a minimal level of sophistication on the part of minority group members concerning ways to access and to make systems more responsive to their needs (Barbarin, 1981).

Some communities have this type of organizational awareness and individual sophistication. Those that do not can benefit from the efforts of citizens, especially human service practitioners, in reducing institutional racism. Good communities can be created, communities that support cultural diversity and social support systems which respond to the needs of all cultural, racial, and ethnic groups.

### **Barriers for Women**

Communities often place women in a disadvantageous position and impose burdens upon them which restrict their full participation in community life. Communities that are successful in improving environmental and social conditions for women are more competent than those which are not so successful. A number of special burdens or barriers for women have been identified in the feminist literature

## CHAPTER 2

# Systems Perspectives for Understanding Communities

In this chapter we examine basic concepts of ecological systems and social systems, two different but complementary frameworks for understanding communities. These systems perspectives establish a basis for understanding the structure and processes of locality-based communities. Both perspectives contribute to our knowledge of ways in which social interactions of individuals, groups, and organizations are patterned within a community. The application of systems models to communities involves consideration of the various social units which make up a community—that is, “(1) all individuals enacting community roles; (2) all of those social groups and other such social units that enact or perform community-related functions; and (3) all formal organizations . . . that perform community-related functions” (Chess and Norlin, 1988).

### COMMUNITY AS AN ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM

Human ecology provides an interesting theoretical perspective for examining a community as a system. From an ecological standpoint, community may be defined as: “a structure of relationships through which a localized population provides its daily requirements” (Hawley, 1950). This definition is grounded in Hawley’s definition of ecology as “the study of the relation of populations to their environment.”

The focus of this definition is on “spatial organization,” that is, “the distribution of people and services operating in a system of interdependence.” It also implies an organizational feature commonly described as a “division of labor,” the interaction of occupational groups and technology in a stratification structure which results in interdependence of the parts of the community and between communities (Hawley, 1950; 1986).

The community as an ecological system operates at two levels, the biotic (subsocial) and the social. As in plant and animal ecology, a pattern of interdependence develops among humans who “share a common habitat” (Poplin, 1979). These patterns or relationships at the biotic level are not considered to be deliberate or rationally determined but are viewed as impersonal and symbiotic. Such patterns can be observed in a community structure which is developed through the process of competition. This underlying structure of a community provides a foundation for a social level of organization, involving social relationships which can be described in terms of consensus and communication.

The ecologist’s definition of competition is somewhat different from the common use of the term. This view of competition maintains that since groups and institutions within a community depend on one another a symbiosis must develop, that is, a living together. This development comes from a “cooperative competition,” which allows for an accommodation to the interests of diverse groups rather than the elimination of groups through a destructive competitive process (Poplin, 1979). A major area of competition in communities is over the use of land, as individuals, groups, and social institutions seek what might be called an “advantage of place” for commercial, industrial, institutional, and residential purposes. Social units are described as dominant when they have the power to control the use of the most valued land in a community. In addition to competition, a number of other processes are associated with an ecological perspective of community. These include processes such as centralization, concentration, segregation, invasion, and succession (McKenzie, 1926; Poplin, 1979).

Centralization describes a clustering of institutions and services in a central location, such as a business district or a transportation or communication center. Such centralization in the early development of a central city leads to its domination of the surrounding hinterland. The concept of decentralization describes the process by which individuals or organizations move out from a central location, for example, movements of businesses to new suburban shopping areas.



Concentration describes the influx of individuals, especially through migration, into an urban area. The process of segregation describes how individuals, groups, and institutions, distinguished by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, social class, or religion, locate in separate physical locations. Segregation is an ongoing process whereby groups isolate themselves from one another, as in the development of white suburban neighborhoods. When one group moves into an area occupied by a distinctively separate group—e.g., African Americans into white neighborhoods, business into residential areas—this is called invasion. The term *succession* is used to describe the state of the area once invasion is completed.

Early ecologists in the Chicago School, Park, Burgess, and McKenzie (1925), believed that ecological processes led to predictable patterns of land use, spatial distribution, and community organization. These patterns were described in terms of concentric circles, or zones. Five zones were identified: central business district, zone of transition, zone of independent working men's homes, zone of better residences, and commuters' zone (suburban residential areas). Describing the spatial organization of a community in terms of zones or sectors highlights the heterogeneity and homogeneity of urban areas (Choldin, 1985). Some zones attract homogeneous population groups. Ecologists label these zones "natural areas"; examples include skid rows, Chinatowns, rooming house districts, industrial areas, and ethnic neighborhoods. These areas are seen as "natural" because they are unplanned and result from the process of selection and competition related to land use. Research on communities since the development of the concentric zone hypothesis indicates that most growth in cities has not continued to develop in a concentric zone pattern. Nonetheless, "natural" communities with common culture and concerns continue to form within the urban community.

#### APPLICATION OF AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

An ecological perspective allows us to describe the community in terms of social geography, the distribution of people, organizations, and resources in space. This perspective calls attention to the physical layout of the community, that is, the location of residences, industrial units, commercial and business areas, services, churches, hospitals, recreational areas, social agencies, and schools. It allows for the observation of changes in the use of space, in the distribution of people, and the movements of people over time. The concepts of

centralization, invasion, succession, and their measurement are used to describe these changes.

A first step in describing the physical environment and showing the land uses of a community is through mapping. This approach is vividly presented by Suttles (1968) in his classic study on *The Social Order of the Slum*. Suttles' map of the Addams neighborhoods displays an area in Chicago characterized by mixed land use patterns of industry, public housing, private housing, schools, churches, small businesses, playgrounds, and vacant lots. Another map pictures this same area in terms of its ethnic sections as defined by local residents, segregated for the most part into sections of Italians, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans. This determination of ethnic boundaries has been called social mapping (Green, 1982), as there is a focus on the cultural characteristics of geographic areas of a community.

Another approach to mapping the community is to identify various kinds of boundaries within a community, such as school districts, health districts, census tracts, religious congregation boundaries, social agency service boundaries, and subcommunities with names. For example, the city of Chicago is divided up into seventy-six community areas, each with a name designation (Taub et al., 1984). For purposes of delivering mental health services, communities have been divided into catchment areas, defining service boundaries for local community mental health centers.

An example of using an ecological approach related to social work practice is found in the development of mobility skills training for people in need of community mental health services (Taylor and Taylor, 1989). Mobility skills involve the ability to move around freely in the community and to arrive at one's destination. Training in these skills begins with a map, followed by the development of cognitive maps, that is, mental representations and associations of how to get to places, using signs, buildings, streets, bus lines, landmarks, and so forth. Such training is expected to facilitate the client's access to and use of services through mastery of travel within a community.

A somewhat different use of mapping is illustrated in the use of an ecological perspective to locate neighborhoods at high risk for child maltreatment, such as child neglect, child abuse, and child sexual abuse (Zuravin and Taylor, 1987). In this application, data on incidence rates are used to present "incidence mapping," "a clear visual impression of distribution patterns by displaying on a map the incidence rate for each specific subdivision of a larger geographic area." One technique of presentation is to print the actual rate on each part

of the geographic area; another is to identify areas by color or by geometric pattern. An alternative way of presenting data on high risk is to use spot mapping, which "identifies distribution patterns by placing a dot on the map at the specific address of each incident." A major purpose of mapping in this illustration is for service planning at the community level.

### COMMUNITY AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

Social systems theory provides another useful framework for understanding American communities. While the theory is unusually complex, its major concepts guide us in identifying the structural and functional attributes of a wide variety of communities. We begin with the idea that a social system involves the interaction of two or more social units, that is, the interactions of individuals in social groups such as families, neighborhood groups, or peer groups, and the interactions within and among social groups and social organizations. It is therefore important to identify the particular social system we wish to understand. In the instance of a locality-based community, we are interested in understanding how the system is functioning. This involves examination of the various subsystems within a community, such as the economic, political, educational, health, and social welfare systems. We seek to understand the activities of the various social units which make up the subsystems in order to determine how well these subsystems are carrying out their community functions. The major social units within each of these subsystems are formal organizations, such as businesses, governmental units, churches, schools, health care organizations, and social welfare agencies. Informal groups, including families, social groups, and groups attached to formal organizations, also contribute to the functioning of community subsystems and the community as a whole.

An important feature of social systems theory is the specification of the boundaries of the system in relation to its environment. To illustrate, a central city or other municipality in a metropolitan area may be defined as a community system, with boundaries which are likely to be both geographical and psychological. The environment includes other municipalities as well as state, regional, and national entities with which the municipal community interacts. One of the central functions of such a community system is boundary maintenance. A community engages in activities which will assure its continuance as a separate entity or social organization. Boundary maintenance is

exemplified by physical boundaries and legal, political boundaries. For communities of interest, there are social boundaries, such as membership criteria that are related to lifestyle, social class, ethnicity, or racial identification.

A second feature of a systems model concerns the interaction of the system with "outside" systems beyond its own boundary, such as other communities and society. This outside system, designated as the suprasystem, provides inputs into a community system and receives outputs. Thus this interaction provides for inputs into the system, such as culture, money, material resources, and information (Cress and Norlin, 1988). Outputs may be thought of as the results of the interactions within a system, such as the goals of a community or its subsystems. These goals are related to employment, health, safety and security, social welfare, education, housing, and other indicators of quality of life (Cress and Norlin, 1988).

The concepts of input and output of systems are related to the way in which interactions of the units within a social system are patterned. Classical social systems theory, particularly as developed by Talcott Parsons (1951), describes these patterns in terms of systems functions. Patterns having to do with the system's external activities serve adaptive functions and goal attainment functions. Internal activities are viewed in terms of integrative functions and pattern-maintenance/tension-management functions. It is useful to define these terms, as they represent problems a community must solve in order to maintain itself.

Goal attainment is defined by Parsons (1960) as the "gratification of the units of the system." This function deals with the problem of "How to achieve the community's task output of improving the quality of life of its citizens through the provision of facilities and services that will help satisfy common needs and cope with common problems" (Cress and Norlin, 1988). Adaptation is the "manipulation of the environment in the interests of goal attainment," that is, on gaining the necessary resources for the operation of the system. This function focuses on the problem of "How to optimize community goal attainment by modifying the suprasystem or, if necessary, by modifying community structures and goals" (Cress and Norlin, 1988). Integration is the "attachment of member units to each other." This function relates to the problem of "How to optimize satisfaction of the community's maintenance outputs" (Cress and Norlin, 1988). Pattern maintenance involves dealing with the malintegration of the units of the system. This function responds to the problem of maintaining the community in relation to its changing internal environment.

Systems functions are often labeled "task functions" and "maintenance functions." Task functions of adaptation and goal attainment involve relationships with the outside environment through the economy and the polity. Integration functions occur in the juridical system, and pattern-maintenance/tension-management is handled by groups such as the family and educational and cultural units of the community. Communities as systems must relate to changes within and without the system and maintain themselves through systems functions. From a systems perspective, a community constantly seeks a level of stability or equilibrium. Thus when the various subsystems of the community change there is an impact on the total system. When the task or maintenance functions of the subsystems of a community are not carried out successfully, the result is a lack of goal attainment which may lead to community disorganization.

#### APPLICATION OF A SOCIAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

In applying social systems concepts to locality-based communities, Warren (1963) specified five functions which a community performs: production/distribution/consumption, socialization, social control, social participation, and mutual support. Our examination of these functions will focus on the municipal community, which is composed of subsystems that carry out these major "locality relevant" functions. The major subsystems, sometimes referred to as social institutions, include the economy, government, education, religion, and health and social welfare. These subsystems carry out community functions mainly through formal organizations, such as corporations, governmental units, schools, churches, medical care facilities, social welfare agencies, and voluntary associations. In addition to these formal structures in the community, there are numerous primary groups that engage in social activities on a daily basis and often contribute to the performance of community functions. These primary groups include family and other household groups, friendship groups, kinship groups, neighborhood groups, peer groups, self-help groups, and informal social club groups.

Let us consider further the five community functions identified by Warren. Production/distribution/consumption activities in urban communities require a high degree of specialization of employment (division of labor) and the presence of complex bureaucratic organizations (e.g., business, industry) and consumption patterns (of goods,

services, energy). The daily living of individuals is dependent on the performance of the economic subsystem.

Socialization of individuals and groups involves the impact of culture on personality, the learning of values and behavior, and the patterning of social roles. The family and the school are the most obvious social units contributing to socialization of community members, but other forces—for example, friendship groups, kinship groups, television, radio, movies, newspapers, popular magazines, and books—are also involved in the process.

Social control involves a range of pressures on people to behave according to community and societal norms. These pressures come from a variety of sources, some internal to the individual and some from the social environment. A principal source of social control is the local government, that is, law enforcement agencies, courts, and such "control" arrangements as stop lights, parking meters, and no-smoking signs.

Social participation occurs within both informal primary groups and formal organizations. Social participation includes a wide range of activities within and connected to schools, churches, political parties, social clubs, organizational board memberships, recreational facilities, and fund-raising events.

Mutual support involves assisting people in need when the needs are beyond the capability of the individual, the family, or the household. Mutual support occurs in relation to illnesses which require professional help, family problems requiring professional counseling, learning and behavioral problems of children requiring professional counseling, and economic problems requiring income maintenance programs and financial assistance. A primary source of mutual support consists of health organizations and social welfare agencies. The activities of social workers providing mutual support are not limited to social agencies and health care organizations. Social workers are often involved in government and business sectors through social programs involving employment services, job counseling, money management, and job training; in court services, criminal justice systems, and legal aid services.

Communities interact with other communities, and these external relationships have important implications for the way in which a particular community system maintains its boundaries and its equilibrium. But more importantly, community subsystems interact through their formal organizations with similar social units outside the community. These extracommunity relationships are identified by

Warren (1963) as vertical, in contrast to the horizontal interactions within a community. These types of relationships are illustrated by Warren in regard to mutual support. An example of a typical community unit is a voluntary health association; a unit of horizontal pattern: community welfare council; a unit of a vertical pattern: National Health Association.

### COMMUNITY AS AN "ECOLOGY OF GAMES"

Concepts from ecological and social systems theory are combined by Long (1958) in order to create a framework for understanding the local community. Long contends that a local community can be understood as a territorial system within which structured group activities occur. Sets of these activities can be viewed as "games"—for example, "a banking game, a contracting game, a newspaper game, a civic organization game, an ecclesiastical game, and many others." The major games are similar to the community subsystems which carry out the functions cited by Warren (1963), that is, production, socialization, social control, social participation, and mutual support. Drawing from ecological theory, Long suggests that there is no overall coordination of the games in the community; rather, they relate to each other in a symbiotic manner. Thus, the subsystems of the community operate in an ordered but unplanned basis, with the general public deciding whether or not the games are being played well. The social order in the community is maintained because the games have expectations, norms, and rules for their players, not because there is an overall political game which dominates the system. This idea of social order has been elaborated upon by Giamatti (1989) in his book, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games*. Giamatti compares communities to sports, noting that they are both "deeply conventional," with established rules and social agreements. Giamatti maintains that when conventions "cohere and are abided by" in communities, we have a city where people choose to live, just as people continue to watch or participate in sports in which the rules are adhered to.

An important question arising from the games analogy is, what game or group links the various games together into the social order of the community? Under Long's formulation, the various games in the community are seen as competing with one another, but they are linked through social interaction of leaders in each of the games. Officeholders and organizational executives have an interest in achieving

their organizational goals within their own games, and they recognize that interaction with "players" in other games is important. The leaders in the various games are all influenced by the newspaper game, as it seeks to set the civic agenda, the topics, concerns, and ideas that people talk about, have an investment in, and expect the civic leadership to do something about. While the various games may contribute to the overall order of the whole community, Long suggests that the social game may be the most significant group that integrates all the games. The social game is played by leaders in the various subsystems (games) of the community, through such activities as overlapping board memberships, social standing, and social activities.

The games analogy provides an interesting way of thinking about the goals, functions, and activities of the organizations within the various community subsystems. It helps in assessing the extent to which each of the subsystems functions effectively in a community, using a "keeping score" approach to measure community competence. The games perspective points to ways of understanding the leadership and power structure within a community. Taking the social welfare game as an example, each human service organization can be examined in terms of the part it plays in the social welfare game, what score it receives for services delivered and effectiveness and attainment of social goals, how the organizational leaders within the social welfare field interact with each other, and how the organization relates to welfare coordinating agencies and to other subsystems.

Viewing the community as a social system involving a number of subsystems provides a framework for answering a number of questions about communities. Chapters 7 through 11 will help you to formulate answers to these questions as you apply them to a particular community.

1. To what extent and under what conditions do voluntary associations contribute to the competence of the total community, and what functions do these associations serve for individual citizens?
2. To what extent do the formal organizations within a subsystem of the community articulate with each other and with other subsystems through interorganizational relations?
3. In what ways are community actions, as played out in the various subsystems, influenced by vertical relationships—that is, extra-community influences?
4. How is some degree of integration and social order created and maintained among the subsystems of a community?

5. How is the functioning of community subsystems coordinated or influenced by the power and/or decision-making structure of a community. Under what conditions does one or another subsystem become dominant in a community?

#### REVIEW

The systems properties of communities direct our attention to the social organization of a community and the processes which relate to stability and change. Two systems perspectives, ecological and social systems, guide our study of communities. The ecological perspective emphasizes the spatial properties of a community, the demographic characteristics of population groups, and the interdependencies which develop within and among communities to assure the requirements of daily living. The social systems perspective demonstrates how a community operates to perform locality relevant functions for its members. The principal focus is on the performance of subsystems, and their formal organizations—such as social welfare agencies, schools, churches, businesses, local governmental units. Norton Long's (1958) framework for analyzing a community as an "ecology of games" provides an interesting way of understanding the functioning of these subsystems.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

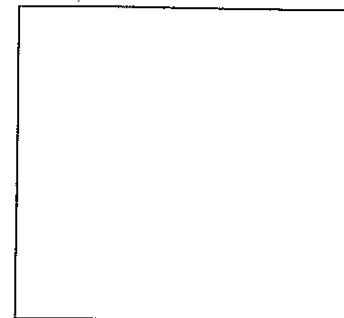
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## PART TWO

# An Ecological Perspective

