Longing for Virtuous Community

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‘Community’ as always ensuring wellbeing or as something more ambiguous

We have all known the long loneliness, and we have found that the answer is community.

Dorothy Day (1983)

A term that is constantly heard in regards to many matters related to disability is the term ‘community’. Most often community is heralded as being a highly desirable, if not essential, element of the good life for most people including those persons with intellectual disabilities. It would seem for many that community is perhaps even the *sine qua non* of a life lived well. In this regard, community is clearly seen to be something that is highly associated with personal wellbeing, such that the absence of ‘community’ in one’s life would be seen as constituting a form of deprivation or perhaps something worse. Consequently, it is offered as an end point for policy, practice and values. If ‘community’ in actuality is an essential requirement of living and is not sufficiently present for people, then the clear inference is that its lack will lead to suffering and distress for those people affected by its absence in their lives.

A lack of precision in how community is defined and interpreted makes its assessment quite hard to specify, as much can be read into the use of the term ‘community’ depending upon one’s epistemology and core assumptions. For instance, if the ‘good life’ is a life of one’s own choosing, how might one see the role of obligations to others that limits one’s choices? One could conceivably choose to have and raise children for the enjoyment and life satisfaction they might engender, yet place little importance on the parental duties and demands that raising children brings. This tension between self-centredness and responsibilities to others pervades the nature of ‘community’, as there are many potential benefits of ‘community’, but these might only be realised in reality if the people in a given community take on the responsibilities of upholding the ideals of that community. For instance, it is hard to imagine a commonwealth of any kind succeeding with equity when significant economic sectors of that society successfully evade their share of taxes while still benefitting from what those taxes generate in terms of community capacities (i.e. a sanctioned ‘free rider’ in economic terms).

As has been said, the term ‘community’ can be used to suggest that being part of ‘community’ is integral to individual and collective wellbeing. Nonetheless, this very positive and benign notion of community presence and participation assumes that one’s role(s) in community will always engender beneficial outcomes. However, the experience of many socially devalued groups within diverse communities seems to show the opposite, as the former suffer from prejudice, inequality, injustice and mistreatment, possibly for generations. The insistence that simply being in community is linked to inevitable beneficial outcomes may be predicated on the assumption that the individual is a valued and largely socially included member of the community and treated accordingly. Community as an automatic source of the ‘good life’ may be quite a wishful, if not naïve, understanding of how communities actually work. Hence, those people segregated and excluded from ‘community’ could be endangered in ways that have consequences that are potentially profound in their impacts on the inherent quality of those people’s lives. One only has to look at the history of institutionalisation and its effects to realise that communities do indeed reject and banish people with dehumanising consequences for them.

Certainly, the long list of types of people who have been cast aside and marginalised in many societies is much too lengthy to dismiss as being some kind of rarity. Rather, human communities are quite problematic because of the very fact that the specific
nature of communities is closely linked to how they operate and the kinds of values they embrace or fail to embrace. The miseries created in the lives of so many socially devalued people ought not to be seen as somehow divorced from ‘community’. After all, these sufferings may arise from the essential character of a given community or society. For instance, when the life expectancy, health status, educational and employment prospects of socially devalued groups in a given community are much less than others in that same community, then that ‘community’ is culpable in tolerating that some people and classes of people will experience deprived lives and associated distress.

‘Community’ as a potential resource for a good life

A community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess.

A. Philip Randolph (2015)

Though communities may not benefit people equally, it is striking how variable human societies are in terms of the benefits they provide to their members. If one considers various quality of life indices across societies, such as the UN Human Development Index, the OECD Better Life Index, the Gallup Global Wellbeing Index and the Social Progress Index, it is clear that societies differ considerably, notwithstanding the complexities of measuring something as difficult to define as human wellbeing. Obviously, the type of society will sizeably influence both what is possible for people’s overall collective wellbeing as well as what may impact any given individual within that society.

The point not to lose sight of is that the character of a given society will have real consequences for the lives of people. Often these consequences are, on balance, quite beneficial, such as life expectancy, access to health care and education, freedom from crime and war, environmental quality, employment, etc. Though one could usefully dispute the precise importance of one factor of wellbeing over another, it would be unwise to doubt that the value choices of a society relative to its members are linked and so the key question is what kind of community is it? For instance, if one examines other societal indices of potentially advantageous or damaging impacts to the quality of community life such as the Corruption Perceptions Index, the World Crime Index and the World Democracy Index, we can see that if one is in a society that performs well on corruption, crime and democracy, there are real benefits to the population.

‘Community’ as a social movement ‘meme’

Cultures, along with the religions that shape and nurture them, are value systems, sets of traditions and habits clustered around one or several languages, producing meaning: for the self, for the here and now, for the community, for life.

Tariq Ramadan (2012)

The term ‘meme’ is often not familiar to people. The Oxford Dictionary definition is ‘an element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means.’ It would seem that ‘community’ is a cultural term in this sense. Not unsurprisingly, the claims put forward on the ostensible benefits of ‘community’ are many. What informs people’s thinking may have components to it that reflect their own experience or perceptions of what they believe to be ‘community’ and also what others might say about their own experience of it. In other words, ‘community’ could well be a product of culture in the sense that it has become a ‘meme’ or core narrative of this period within what might be called the world of disability.

As many are aware, this sense of ‘community’ as being important owes a great deal of its prominence in the current era due to various interlinked social movements that have arisen in response to the past social devaluation and mistreatment of people with
intellectual disabilities. Much of this abuse of people with intellectual disabilities had been specifically associated with the negative effects of residential institutions on people’s lives. The subsequent dissent against such settings has revolved around how damaging the thinking and treatment of people with intellectual disabilities associated with that period has been and remains. Hence, the current prominence of ‘community’ owes a great deal to its explicit use as a central remedy or antidote to all manner of poor treatment of people with intellectual disabilities within society, including maltreatment which had happened within community itself rather than solely in segregated institutional settings.

At least on one level, ‘community’, like any potential cure-all or panacea, needs not actually be in itself a remedy to the various evils it is meant to overcome. Its function as a ‘meme’ simply provides a common symbol that can help to rally and unite the diverse factions common to the heterogeneity of social movements. For instance, if one substituted the word ‘hope’ for ‘community’, one might find many supporters of ‘hope’ as long as it gave people a way to respond to human sufferings that had at least some promise in terms of making life better in the view of the proponents of ‘hope’.

In this way, the term ‘community’ may, at the least, functionally provide a way for people to explicitly reject the realities that have brought about suffering and mistreatment of people as being oppressive, unjust, damaging and immoral. In this sense, it may move people to consider the necessity of abandoning key elements of a given social order even if they do not know what might conceivably replace these elements. Further, the conviction that ‘something should be done’ generates the search for what it is precisely that needs doing if things are to improve. Lastly, it forces people to examine and address what they perceive to be the sources of human wellbeing in both an individual and collective sense.

Given the social movement value of a shared analysis of what is wrong with the world and what might repair it, then the rise of a term like ‘community’ as a proposed end point to collectively aim for may make a great deal of sense as a socially unifying and collective ambition. In this version of its use it plays a symbolic and projective role rather than defining a specific eventual operational reality. This same unifying value in regards to other social movements can be seen in slogans such as freedom, democracy, justice, equality, rights, progress, etc. It is not the words per se that matter in a social movement, it is what people understand by and invest in those words.

**Definitional ambiguities of what exactly ‘community’ is or might be**

We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community...

Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.

*Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard Garcia (1997)*

It is notable how many languages have a word for community yet does ‘community’ really mean the same thing from one language to another? Even within a given culture the term ‘community’ is used in quite varied and nuanced ways, so it is often very difficult to disentangle one shade of meaning from another, as the various versions of ‘community’ often overlap and are commonly used without any self-conscious attempts at precise definition. What follows are examples of the range of diverse meanings attributed to ‘community’.

If we return to the Oxford Dictionary, we see that the origin of the term ‘community’ was the Latin word for ‘common’ i.e. *communitas* from *commis* and this evolved to Middle English *commune*, from Anglo-French *communité*.

This same dictionary lists the following uses of the term:

1. a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common
2. a group of people living together and practising common ownership
3. a particular area or place considered together with its inhabitants
4. a body of nations or states unified by common interests
5. the people of a district or country considered collectively, especially in the context of social values and responsibilities.

It is evident that these formal definitions of ‘community’ do not specifically address the potential qualitative functions of ‘community’ as a source for supporting human life satisfaction and fulfilment that the social movement uses of the term tend to suggest. Rather, these dictionary definitions tend to speak to the types of relatively narrow commonalties between people that have clearly preceded the current era.

These resources embedded within communities may be assumed in some instances to be beneficial in nature, but clearly some communities may have abundant resources within them that do not equally benefit all members of that community. Hence, the use of the term ‘community’ may on occasion conflate the potential beneficial nature of community resources with some kind of universal access to them. Hence, there may be a presumption that communities will always be moral and ethical in their use of resources relative to those defined as community members. Such a use of the term ‘community’ may therefore operate from a wishful or romanticised view of communities as many would prefer them to be, rather than what they might actually be like in practice.

Consequently, one could evaluate communities as being variable in nature, not only in terms of the ethicality, equity and justice of their provision of ‘community’ resources to ‘community’ members, but also from other dimensions of ‘community’ functioning and resource distribution and its conceivable impact on the wellbeing of community members. For instance, some communities may favour certain classes over others, some communities may exploit some subgroups and not others, some communities may socially devalue some subgroups and exalt others, some communities may exclude some subgroups yet include others, and so on. Such an evaluation of communities as not being automatically beneficial in nature relative to community members is similar to the formulation in politics of Realpolitik to serve as a more discerning antidote, or at least counterweight, to highly idealistic or uncritically idealised views of politics as it is, rather than what many might want it to be.

Even so, this idea of ‘realism without values’ also has its difficulties, as an utterly practical and potentially ruthless approach to either community or politics risks the abandonment of beneficial morals and ethics and their enriching effects on community. For instance, many national communities have taken it to be axiomatic, for several generations at least, that all citizens without exception have reasonable access to health care, whereas a society such as the current United States has until recently enshrined inequitable access as normative and both morally and politically preferred. Clearly, this difference in principle and morality is not insignificant in terms of who suffers and who does not and thus has moral meaning as to the type of ‘community’ one can expect in that nation while that outlook persists.

‘Community’ is a term that is hard to divorce from its qualitative dimensions, as communities clearly can differ in terms of their comparative benefits to their overall members or subgroups of their members. Consequently, the tentative posing of ‘community’ as being an end point for human development and wellbeing, cannot be taken up as a question unless one is prepared to recognise that communities and their many features can vary in different ways as:

- both damaging and beneficial depending upon their specific impacts on the people in a given ‘community’
- altered for the better or worse by the de facto value choices of that ‘community’
- dynamic in nature and thus capable of change, evolution and decadence given what outlook on human wellbeing is in place
- susceptible to being misunderstood by their members depending upon the ideologies present that shape public perception
- driven by interests that may be unacknowledged, counter to popular assumptions and contrary to the stated values of given communities.
The vested interests of people with intellectual disabilities in the debate about the qualities of a more optimal ‘community’

Community is a sign that love is possible in a materialistic world where people so often either ignore or fight each other. It is a sign that we don’t need a lot of money to be happy – in fact, the opposite.

*Jean Vanier (1989)*

If decisions about the nature of ‘community’ and communities were proven to be inconsequential in terms of the wellbeing of the people in a given community, then promoting community changes for the better would be pointless. However, people with intellectual disabilities are never entirely apart from the collective decisions of communities even when they are segregated and excluded from that community, since such segregation itself derives from the roles such communities place people with intellectual disabilities in in the first place. Much as the privileged in a given community benefit from how that community is organised and what decisions it makes, it would be mistaken to assume that all decisions taken will invariably benefit community members equally. In fact, decisions taken not to require broad swaths of the community to ensure normative accessibility of people with intellectual disabilities to all of the major elements of community life will inevitably ensure that people with intellectual disabilities are deprived of the resources that others are able to enjoy almost without noticing.

There are many benefits of ‘community’ that people with intellectual disabilities have a significant interest in obtaining because these will impact on their overall wellbeing and quality of life. These include, but are not limited to, many normative aspects of community life that many others routinely can take for granted:

- obtaining an education, work and an income
- having physical and social access to all public community events and locations
- not being discriminated against due to negative stereotypes
- obtaining the same variety of valued social roles available to other citizens that might personally interest them
- having the varieties of relationships and ‘community’ group memberships that may be of personal interest to them
- having the opportunity to contribute to ‘community’
- having the same rights and opportunities as others enjoy
- having the capacities and supports available to them to act and live with normative autonomy
- obtaining a secure and appealing ‘home of one’s own’
- accessing financial and other pertinent resources sufficient to live autonomously within the ‘community’ without being involuntarily institutionalised
- being assured of similar normative levels of safety and freedom from crime and abuse comparable to other citizens
- being able to expect the same quality of public services as others.

The preceding are examples of significant ingredients of what many people might think of in terms of their own version of the ‘good life’. However, their achievement is difficult if one is acting solely on one’s own, as they are outcomes directly tied to how a given community or society functions collectively in practice for its members. In this regard they reflect the overall cultural character of a ‘community’ at a given point in time. It is most certainly the case that people with intellectual disabilities have a great deal riding on the question of the character of the communities in which they live as both the strengths and failings
of a given ‘community’ can potentially have both beneficial and damaging impacts on their lives. Thus, the specific character of ‘community’ is intertwined with their wellbeing, just as it is with all other members of a ‘community’.

‘Community’ as variable conditions of living

The wellbeing of a community of people working together will be the greater, the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds of his work, i.e. the more of these proceeds he makes over to his fellow-workers, the more his own needs are satisfied, not out of his own work but out of the work done by others.

Rudolf Steiner (1927)

Interdependence with a ‘community’ is inevitable to a greater or lesser degree, as most people’s existence occurs within the context of one or more communities. In reality, even those who intentionally drop out of ‘community’ and live intentional solitary existences apart from their former lives may not be entirely divorced from ‘community’, as much as being voluntarily withdrawn from the life of community. Similarly, those persons who are involuntarily removed from ‘community’ by the state because of their criminal conduct still remain part of that ‘community’, but in a much more restricted sense than previously. In fact, the extent and nature of this exclusion from community for the same criminal acts varies widely from one nation to another.

Given that many in the disability sector seem to portray ‘community’ as the essence of or key to the wellbeing of people with intellectual disabilities, it is useful to distinguish whether this hope that community will deliver wellbeing is justified. First, given that not all communities are equal in terms of the benefits they may bring to a given person’s life, it is conceivable that people with intellectual disabilities may be comparatively disadvantaged by living in one community versus another, if these communities differ substantively. For instance, it is striking how different the rates of employment of people with intellectual disabilities can be from one part of a country to another.

It is not unusual for a given person with a disability to have a distinctly different life experience from another person with a disability, even when they live in the same community. In this regard, community life may have normative shared features in a collective sense for its members, but that is distinct from the extensive variability evident in the lives of individual persons with intellectual disabilities. For instance, it is statistically true that people with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be victims of crime than the general population, but that still leaves the vast majority of people with intellectual disabilities not personally having experienced or being victimised by crime.

While the overall character of a given community creates many ‘conditions on the ground’ that might be advantageous or not to a given person and even broad groups of persons with a disability, this is not the same as saying that the character of ‘community’ somehow entirely controls the factors that might go into a given person’s sense of wellbeing, as some personally important elements of wellbeing for a given person may exist despite the widespread oppressive constraints of a given community. For instance, many people with intellectual disabilities may find loving companions and marriage partners in life despite the fact that others who also would have sought this outcome ultimately find themselves without that element of wellbeing. This would also hold for non-disabled persons, as not all the potential benefits of communities are realised uniformly in people’s lives.

The root of this mistaken conflation of ‘community’ with universal wellbeing seems to be the unwarranted perception that ‘community’ is the same as life itself, rather than the more warranted role of community as a key ingredient in shaping the conditions of life, but not as the source of life and wellbeing itself. Were it the source of all things good in life, then it would be a more reasonable expectation that simply accessing ‘community’ would somehow have an immediately existentially beneficial and even transcendent effect. In this sense, ‘community’ could equate somewhat to the terms ‘deliverance’ or ‘salvation’ in the secular sense, i.e. ‘preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss’ (Oxford Dictionary). However, in the nonsecular
Christian sense, deliverance could only be provided by God and clearly ‘community’ is not God, though the Christian concept of ‘communion’ presumes a shared spiritual link with God that potentially unites people with each other through the Divine. In this sense, ‘community’ may serve as an ideological proxy or even panacea for ‘the good life’, as has been indicated in the preceding remarks on its role as a social movement meme.

It is not hard to see why this mental linkage may have occurred given the brutal and damaging consequences of social devaluation experienced by many people with intellectual disabilities, both in institutional settings and in other largely segregated and deprived existences within ‘community’. In both instances, such dehumanisation and degradation of people with intellectual disabilities occurred at the hands of ‘community’, so it would be puzzling on a logical level as to why ‘community’ is now somehow to be uncritically trusted as the way forward. Clearly, what the proponents of ‘community’ today are proposing is not the type of ‘community’ that led to the institutions, but rather a notably much improved ‘community’ i.e. a transformed or redeemed ‘community’.

In fact, the view that ‘community’ can, on occasion, be transformed for the better has certainly proved to be valid, as the life conditions and opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities within present day communities have clearly got better in many important ways in a comparative historical sense. However, given the many definitions of community that rest upon a sense of commonalities amongst people, even today’s communities have not transcended human nature to the point of placing people with intellectual disabilities out of danger at the hands of their own ‘community’. For example, it is often quoted that over 90-92% of fetuses identified in utero as having Down’s syndrome are aborted. More recent studies set this figure more at around 67%, but that is without controlling for differences from culture to culture and differences within populations in the same culture. Obviously, the mere existence of offspring with Down’s syndrome still remains devalued by a significant majority, since ‘not getting born’ most certainly irrevocably interferes with ‘the good life’. Nonetheless, it is quite unlikely that such a number will remain the same given the plasticity of cultures and the attitudes embedded in them.

The recognition that ‘community’ can be changed for the better is quite real, as is the reality that community can also change for the worse. Further, both trends can be at work at the same time creating divergent tensions within the ‘polity’ of community. The overt mass killing of people with intellectual disabilities was public policy and lawful during the Nazi era, as was the involuntary sterilisation of people with intellectual disabilities in many countries up until very recently. Profound discrimination and abuse of people with intellectual disabilities persists into the present and yet simultaneously we also have the unprecedented UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Paradoxically it would seem that ‘community’ is both the source of much of the sufferings of people with intellectual disabilities and yet also the source of much of their liberation from the oppressions of ‘community’. Hence, what many reformers and activists might really mean by ‘community’ is not community as it is, but rather community as it ought to be….and could be i.e. a virtuous community.

The longing for ‘community’ as a search for moral conditions of life within community

Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.

Helen Keller (1903)

Many might quite understandably see the longing for a virtuous community as somehow being a kind of misguided fantasy for naïve idealists who are unable to reconcile themselves to the realities of human existence. Often such critiques of various kinds of idealists as lacking realism are valid and compelling, as their wishful rather than discerning approach to changing communities leaves their efforts ineffectual. However, this critique itself becomes falsified when confronted with idealists who have few illusions about the potentially perverse nature of human beings and ‘community’, yet nonetheless refuse to accept the damaging and
unjust conditions of community life as being somehow beyond challenge and eventual change. But simply wanting a better version of ‘community’ ought not to be confused with engaging personal resolve and commitment to bringing it about. Of course there is no assurance that the struggle will prevail so that people disadvantaged within a particular order of community life are treated ethically and honourably, but the very fact that people will make sacrifices so that this potential might come about brings with it moral force and resolve.

It is not an abstract ‘community’ that is most often sought, as the perception that a community could and should be better brings about the questioning of a community’s shortcomings and begins the long process of changing that community and its ways. The resulting process may not be particularly orderly, but it can focus attention and consciousness on the question of the kinds of virtue that the community holds up as its ideals against which to measure its conduct and social institutions. In this way, the very nature of ‘community’ may be challenged and the search begun for what needs to be done to establish and maintain the virtues that are being sought.

People with intellectual disabilities are only one group in society and community who might stand to gain from the presence and embedding of worthwhile community ethics, values and principles that enable their lives to improve and thrive. We are all bound up in the universality of the human condition. Hence, notwithstanding the many imperfections of efforts to make life better for people, the struggle does create the possibility of communities standing for something and thus asking something of themselves relative to how people are treated within community. Where there is disinterest, disdain and hostility towards a community with virtue, then it can be expected that such attitudes will turn their back on those who are most weakly positioned to advance their own interests. Since there will always be people in this more vulnerable position, community values serve as one of the most fundamental safeguards for their ultimate wellbeing. This is why we must never lose our longing for a virtuous community, as all of us are endangered when people no longer care about what we are and what we have become.

References