Homophily and diversity

The use and effects of bonding versus bridging networks by Townsville Aboriginal activists

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Abstract

The principle of homophily states that people who share certain characteristics will interact more often and more closely than those who are dissimilar. In general, homophily is found to have a strong influence on the organisation of social networks. The categories which lead most directly to strong homophily are race and ethnicity. Many activist movements have been found to tend towards homophily, which can have profound limiting effects on their impacts and successes.

This paper will examine the extent of homophily and networking within Aboriginal activism in Townsville, QLD. It will focus specifically on the daily demonstrations that were held outside the trial of Senior-Sergeant Chris Hurley. At this trial I acted as a participant-observer, attending daily and helping with organisation. What I witnessed was a concerted effort to avoid homophily. Personal invitations were extended by activists to non-Aboriginal academics, feminists, religious organisations, and even the police. This very deliberate attempt to diversify the demonstrations outside the courthouse happened at the expense of homophilic ties. While this has positive effects such as a broadening of support bases, a certain level of homophily is important for the creation of collective identity. What is needed is a balance between homogeneity and diversity.

Keywords: Aboriginal, activist movements, networking, homophily, diversity
Introduction

On November 19, 2004 an Aboriginal man residing on Palm Island was arrested for swearing at a Police Liaison Officer. He was heavily intoxicated, and he struggled as he was moved from the back of the paddy wagon into the watch house. In the struggle the arresting officer and the man fell through the doorway together. How they fell, and what happened immediately afterwards, is still the issue of much debate. Regardless, the man—referred to after death by his language name, Mulrunji—suffered a ruptured liver during or immediately after the fall and died shortly afterwards (Waters 2008). Two and a half years later the arresting officer, Senior-Sergeant Chris Hurley, was put on trial for manslaughter. This was a landmark case, as Hurley was the first Australian police officer ever to be charged over a black death in custody (Waters 2008: 207).

Many activists feel that the only reason Hurley was ever charged was because of the broad-scale organising they undertook following the original Department of Public Prosecution decision against pressing charges. I started my ethnographic fieldwork at the culmination of this activism, and was blown away by the extent and breadth of networks utilised by Aboriginal activists. As I have come to see throughout my fieldwork, there is often a significant amount of dis-unity that characterises the Aboriginal movement, as with any large and diverse group of people. Additionally, many Aboriginal activists are acutely aware that their voice is a minority voice, and thus, that they need to gain broader attention and support to have any success.

The combination of in-fighting and the need for non-Indigenous supporters has led Aboriginal activists to focus their attention outwards. In many social networks, including activist movements, people who share certain characteristics tend to associate with one another rather than with people who are different—this principle is known as homophily. Townsville Aboriginal activists, however, deliberately diversify their support base. This has
many positive effects, but it also means that homophilic ties are occasionally neglected. It is important for movements to have both diverse and homophilic ties, so some strategy must be worked out in order to address both ties at once.

Networking, homophily and heterogeneity

Recent social movement scholars are interested in the ways social movements are “embedded in dense relational settings”, and thus they seek to explore the “web of multiple ties that ultimately make up a social movement” (Diani 2004: 339). Network scholars differentiate between two types of ties; bonding ties, or strong ties, are found between people who are interconnected, while bridging ties, or weak ties, act as connections to other groups and communities (Putnam 1995a; 1995b; Granovetter 1973). In general, networks display a core-periphery pattern, with a central group of similar people who are closely connected to one another, and then increasingly loosely-affiliated people who become less similar as they progress outward from the core (McPherson et al. 2001: 427).

People have been shown to join organisations based on pre-existing lines of interaction (Snow et al. 1980), and this effect is exaggerated in movements which have high personal costs or high risks (McAdam & Paulsen 1993). According to the concept of homophily, people who share similarities are more likely to interact with one another than with very dissimilar people (McPherson et al. 2001; Sandell 1999; Granovetter 1973), because shared characteristics make interactions more comfortable, efficient, and rewarding (Carley 1991: 334). The characteristics which have been found to lead to the highest levels of homophily (that is, higher than expected given population distributions) and the strongest divides in personal environments are race and ethnicity (McPherson et al. 2001).

Because activist movements rely heavily on established networks, they are likely to remain relatively homogenous. Activist groups which depend on networks for their
maintenance tend to be socially localised because members of homophilic groups are more likely to discuss issues and to influence one another (McPherson et al. 2001). In a study of sustainable development activism in Canada, Newman and Dale (2005; also Newman et al. 2008) found activist groups became more homogenous over time. This is corroborated by Sandell (1999) who argues that both the joining and quitting of movement organisations is strongly influenced by other members of the movement with whom one shares similarities. Broadly speaking, collective behaviour is spread via diffusion through pre-existing interpersonal networks. Again, this is illustrated most strongly by racial or ethnic minorities, whose activities are more segregated than the activities of majority groups (McPherson et al. 2001).

Strong homophilic tendencies have both positive and negative impacts on social movements. Homophilic movements are those which are characterised by strong, bonding network connections. Homogenous movements are able to focus on specific issues which are often popular amongst those who are already sympathetic. Thus, there is no need to lighten the intensity of movement goals in order to appeal to a diverse audience (Diani 2004). This leads to a strong collective identity and local cohesion. However, this cohesion can be a downfall, as it can lead to cliques and fragmentation. Cohesive networks have the effect of curtailing autonomy and inhibiting individuals’ abilities to create bridging ties (Gargiulo & Benassi 2000). Homophily also limits information flows, attitudes, and experiences because interactions are restricted to similar individuals (Newman & Dale 2005).

On the other hand, heterogenous movements are based on networks which feature a large number of weak or bridging ties. These weak ties are important for the spread of information across broad networks (Granovetter 1973). A greater number of people of varying demographics can be reached through weak ties via shared network links. Granovetter (1973) argues that the removal of a weak tie will likely hamper information
transmission much more than will the removal of a strong tie. When crossing racial and ethnic boundaries, weak ties are more effective at bridging social distance than strong ties (Granovetter 1973: 1369). A potential drawback of highly heterogenous movements is that their messages must be more vague and encompassing than those which are directed at homophilic groups (Diani 2004: 346-7).

Methods

The research for this paper was undertaken in the earliest stages of my PhD field work. Originally from the United States, I had lived in Townsville for one year before entering the field as an activist researcher in May 2007. After initial meetings with several prominent local activists, I was invited to become a member of the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group. For this ethnographic study I acted as a ‘critically engaged activist researcher’ (Speed 2005) and used participant observation. I quickly became a contributing member of the group when I volunteered to help at events, drafted letters to officials, and set up an email list for the group, which was in the process of organising daily rallies outside the courthouse for Senior-Sergeant Chris Hurley’s manslaughter trial. In the month preceding the trial I attended weekly meetings, and during the trial I attended the daily rallies, after which I recorded detailed field notes. I suspect that I was viewed as a sort of international bridging tie; on several occasions elders and activists noted how pleased they were to have an American in their group, ‘telling the world about their struggle’.

I have not gathered quantitative information on the networks in which activists operate, as is common in networking research. However, the use of participant observation allows for “detailed accounting of the life within particular social movement organizations” (Diani & Eyerman 1992: 2-3). Rather than broad comparative studies, qualitative research on networking aims at in-depth analysis of one particular context. This is a particular strength of
activist research, which allows for “an appreciation for the complexities surrounding social action” (Choudry 2007: 98).

The trial

The crowd that gathered for the start of the criminal trial of Senior-Sergeant Chris Hurley in Townsville on June 7, 2007 was smaller than most people expected. In meetings over the previous several weeks, people anticipated bus loads from around the country. It was not just the activists who had big expectations; the police had been meeting regularly with the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group to discuss where everyone would stay, who could fit in the courtroom, and where the daily rallies would take place.

But on that first morning, the crowds were still significantly less than expected—50, rather than 500. Most were from Townsville and Palm Island. Every day of the trial, a few minutes before the court opened, Gracelyn¹, a prominent Townsville Aboriginal activist, called everyone together on the lawn. We quietly gathered in a circle and held hands. The circle was usually evenly split between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Inside the circle was traditional dancing, followed by a smoking ceremony. Gracelyn said a few words every morning about the importance of gathering together in solidarity, “whether there are two of us or two hundred”. She also regularly reminded us that “this is not about black or white, it's a human rights issue”, and continually called for peace and non-violence. Then members of the crowd were offered the chance to say something. Family members of Mulrunji were given the first opportunity to speak, followed by elders, activists and the general public. Most mornings, prayers were said to the Christian god, as well as to the ancestors.

Each morning of the seven day trial followed this general format. But some days were marked by unique appearances. One morning we were joined by a South African woman,
dressed in her traditional clothing. Before we formed the circle, she spoke with us over coffee about the similarities and differences between South Africa and Australia. Then she joined Mulrunji’s family members for conversation, hugs, and raised fists. On another day we were joined by two senior academics. Other guests included feminists, psychologists, lawyers and other non-Indigenous locals. All of these people were personally invited, mainly by Gracelyn. Others came who were not specifically invited but were nonetheless welcomed, particularly members of the media, who were allowed to break the circle for photo opportunities, to hold microphones close to speakers, or to record broadcasts close by.

Inside the courthouse was a frenzy of reporters, uniformed and un-uniformed police officers and union representatives, lawyers, and Indigenous people from Townsville and Palm Island. Many of these people knew each other so conversation during recesses was lively. One local journalist, writing at the close of the trial, described the atmosphere as “festive”, punctuated by “light-hearted chats” between Aboriginal people and police officers, and with “no evidence at all of any animosity or confrontation” (Weatherup 2007: 4).

Discussion

Most of the writing that is available about homophily and diversity within movements comes from the perspective of non-Indigenous supporters, or is directed towards them. The majority of authors struggle with the role of non-Indigenous supporters. For instance, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (quoted in Jones 2003: 44) regularly dealt with “emotional well-meaning ‘do gooders’” who did not actually listen to Aboriginal people. Gary Foley (2000) shares this sentiment, describing patronising and paternalistic attitudes from people who claim to support Indigenous struggles. These supporters are likely to frame Aboriginal activism “in ways that suit their own needs and perceptions” (Amadahy 2007: 7). Other Indigenous activists feel that non-Indigenous supporters are unwilling to accept the violent colonialist
history of which they are part, but that acceptance is necessary for a successful coalition (Birch 2004; Jones 2003; Foley 2000). Still others find that non-Indigenous supporters require too much attention and education (Amadahy 2007).

Townsville Aboriginal activists cannot escape the reality that Indigenous people only represent 6% of the city’s population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). Furthermore, many have said that Townsville is the most racist city in Australia (cf. Fickling 2003; ABC News 2004). While this assertion is hard to quantify, there is no arguing the fact that activists in this region face considerable opposition, such as a purported Ku Klux Klan cell (McKinnon 2007). Because they view their environment as very hostile, Aboriginal activists are consciously aware of the need to gain broader, non-Indigenous support for their movement.

In order to appeal to a wide audience, the daily actions outside the courthouse were purposely kept low-risk. Because of the extensive liaisons with police officers before the trial began, concerns about the legality of the rallies and the potential for arrests were very low. In an attempt to further reduce the perceived risk, the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group planned on inviting preachers from every local church; however, the bridging tie we relied on for this collapsed in the lead-up to the trial. Still, the rallies were deliberately framed as peaceful prayer vigils. The ways in which an issue is framed will attract certain non-Indigenous advocates (Funk-Unrau 2005), so this deliberate framing shows an astute sense of coalition-building on the part of Townsville Aboriginal activists.

Further framing was attempted by Gracelyn’s repeated chorus that “this isn’t a black issue; this is a human rights issue”. She made this statement both to the daily rallies and to the media, trying to personalise the issue for non-Indigenous people. Choudry (2007: 105) points out that Indigenous peoples utilise certain coalitions to “construct and frame issues so they resonate among diverse groups in different locations”. In an interview I conducted well after the close of the trial, I was told by a woman who has been an Aboriginal activist since
the 1980s, that her generation—that is, the one which followed the struggle for the Referendum, the Tent Embassy, and the establishment of many Aboriginal-controlled services—realises the importance of appealing to white people as well as black.

In addition to the calculated framing attempts, personal invitations were extended to as many people as possible in order to ensure news-worthy numbers at the rallies. Rather than relying on the media to draw a crowd, it was important to follow up with phone calls or emails, because people are more likely to follow through with an action which has been recommended by an interpersonal link (Granovetter 1973). Gracelyn intentionally invited high-profile non-Indigenous community members. Similar networking techniques were employed by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, who “drew a circle of prominent and committed individuals, a dedicated but disparate band of supporters who formed a loose coalition with each other through their mutual association with her” (Jones 2003: 171). This sort of network seems more tenuous than a formalised group, but is suitable when attempts to create a strong activist community fail. While Gracelyn was very clear with her loose coalition that their mere presence was of extreme importance at the daily rallies, without clearly articulated tasks or roles for non-Indigenous supporters, the relationship is unlikely to remain strong for any length of time, as Funk-Unrau (2005) found in Canadian Indigenous and non-Indigenous coalitions.

Further, on the afternoon before the final day of the trial, Gracelyn asked everyone present to bring as many friends and family as they could on the following morning. She wanted a very large circle with many speakers, prayers, and dances. By aiming for a diverse constituency, Townsville Aboriginal activists are able to extend their message to a broad audience, assuming that each individual who attends the rally shares their experience with other network ties who were absent. Moreover, the large number of heterogenous, bridging ties makes a statement to the local population, via the media, that the movement has broad
support. Finally, from Gracelyn’s perspective, the presence of non-Aboriginal supporters had the added benefit of reducing the likelihood of police-instigated violence, which she has seen happen in other contexts.

As important as it is to nurture bridging ties, it should not be done at the expense of homophilic ties. While invitations were extended to non-Indigenous academics, co-workers, friends and acquaintances, it was only one week before the trial actually began that activists thought to speak with the Palm Island Men’s Group. This group, along with other Aboriginal groups and individuals, were expected to know the details of the trial or to hear about it on the local Indigenous radio station. However, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who do not identify as activists are unlikely to act on an invitation which is only extended via mass-media (Granovetter 1973). Ignoring bridging ties may result in a homogenous, inward-focused movement, and too much homophily can lead to cliques and fragmentation (Gargiulo & Benassi 2000; Granovetter 1973). It is often as a result of in-fighting that movements like this one focus their energies on diverse ties. On the other hand, disregard for homophilic ties can leave many people feeling ignored and disenchanted with activists. Further, without strong bonding ties it is unlikely that a movement will have the sense of shared identity that encourages collective action (Saunders 2007). This has the potential for turning some away from the movement, which may explain the lower numbers of people than were expected at the trial.

When movement networks contain a relative balance of bonding and bridging ties, their longevity and success is more likely. Homophilic ties offer local support and dedication, while heterogeneity allows for links to external resources and adaptability (Newman & Dale 2005). This combination makes movements more resilient and reduces the likelihood of activist exhaustion (Newman et al. 2008). However, choices must be made when planning protest events. As Gargiulo and Benassi (2000: 193) point out, social actors have limited time
and resources and so they are faced with a trade-off between cohesiveness and diversity. The choice, then, is between safe, cohesive and homophilic networks or flexible, adaptive, diverse networks. Aboriginal activism in Townsville, though vibrant and adaptive to local conditions, still struggles to achieve a balance between diversity and homophily. Strategies which enable both ties to be addressed at once must be developed, and perhaps the increasing use of electronic networking will make this possible. While Aboriginal activists in Townsville have identified the local challenges and strive to counteract the difficulties in the area, it is important to recognise that both sets of ties are vital to movement longevity and success, and both must be nurtured.

Notes

1 Most names and identifying details have been omitted from this paper. However, names which were highly publicised have been included. Further, several research participants have explicitly requested to be identified in my research, so I have chosen to print their names.

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