From Product to Resource – ‘Community’ in Action

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Abstract:  
The topic of this paper is ‘community’ and its marked resurgence in public discourse. Rather than ask what ‘community’ is or how it behaves, however, the paper investigates the topic by asking how ‘community’ is used. The paper argues that the popularity of ‘community’ is tied to its practical usefulness, an argument predicated on a reappraisal of the sort of social fact that community may be. Taking a broadly ethnogenealogical and conversation analysis (EMCA) approach, the paper proposes that ‘community’ is the name of an inter-active resource rather than the name of a group or gathering to be investigated, at least in the first instance. To explicate this, the paper looks at one instance of ‘community’ in use – the Perth Gay Community Periodic Survey 2004. Using Sacks’ work Membership Categorisation Devices (MCDs), it investigates the way that ‘community’ is used to establish a warrant to ask detailed questions about sexual practice.

Community  
In recent years, ‘community’ has received considerable attention in relation to individual and collective social ills. Its demise and revival have been tracked (Putnam, 2000) and its virtues reconsidered and debated (Young 1990), including its status as instrument of government or capital (Chasin 2000; Crawshaw et al. 2004; Rose 1998). Governments, NGOs and corporate bodies alike claim a desire to involve the ‘community’ in their various enterprises. As both stimulus and effect of this take-up of ‘community’, numerous texts and course of study have emerged, variously devoted to the possibilities and practices of developing, consulting, engaging and otherwise working with it.  
For all that ‘community’ is used in public discourse, however, there is surprisingly little clarity as to what a community may actually be. Standard social science accounts
of community typically identify several different forms, including ‘communities of place’ or ‘geographic communities’, ‘communities of practice’, ‘communities of interest’, ‘functional communities’, ‘elective communities’, and ‘intentional communities’. Although all share some commonality — by virtue of being types of community — there is actually little agreement as to what this commonality is or, in other words, what constitutes ‘community’ (Ife 1999: 91-93).

Such vagueness of definition is not confined to professional analysis, for sociologists, community development workers and social theorists are by no means the only persons for whom it presents some difficulty. The case of ‘community’ in relation to lesbians, gay men, queers and other supposed sexual miscreants is a case in point. In Australia, routine use of ‘community’ in this context dates from around the mid- to late 1970s when talk of ‘the gay community’ largely superseded ‘the gay movement’. Similar shifts have been visible in relation to lesbian movements and communities, although for many lesbians the movement in question was the women’s movement (Plunkett 2005: 201). In the 1990s, ‘gay community’ became ‘lesbian and gay community’, before diversifying into various permutations of ‘LGBTTIQQ communities’ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, questioning and queer). The term ‘Diverse Sexuality and Gender’ has recently come into use in place of LGBTTIQQ, but its take up in relation to ‘community’ is still emerging (although the term ‘gender community’ has developed some history of use).

Whatever the temporal specificity of the take-up of ‘community’ in same-sex attracted milieus, the point here is that disputes over whether or not we are or have communities, and who or what may be accorded the status of a member of such communities, and on what basis, have been rife in and around the various LGBTTIQQ community groups and organizations. Indeed, so fraught has the bounds of LGBTTIQQ ‘community’ become in Perth that, in 2004, the organisation called Lesbian and Gay Pride renamed itself Pride. Its constituency, previous identified as ‘the lesbian and gay community’ in its Constitution became ‘the Pride community’.

Given the definitional vagueness of ‘community’, then, and the difficulties that may accompany it, how do we account for its near ubiquitous use in public discourse? Why is there so much talk about communities when there seems to be so little agreement on what they may be, much less who or what may belong and under what circumstances? Undoubtedly, all manner of psychological or mentalist answers can be
found. The answer proposed in this paper, however, is one based in everyday practice. Specifically, I propose that the trade in ‘community’ has to do with the ways in which the term is an almost indispensable *in situ* resource for inter-action, rather than simply an outcome of it. Specifically, it is possible to see ‘community’ an instance of what Harvey Sacks (1979) called membership categorisation devices (or MCDs).

Briefly, MCDs are ‘commonsense equivalence classes for the identification of persons’ (Hartland 1991: 125). McHoul (2004: 441), however, argues that MCDs are not restricted only to collecting ways of referring to people. MCDs can collect ways of referring to any form of social body, including organisations. Nonetheless, in both Hartland and McHoul’s versions, people assign categories to social bodies as a means of making inferences about the social world. They are key resources for navigating these worlds or, which is the same thing, for producing and recognising social order.

MCD comprise the device name; categories collected by the device; and predicates which identify typical practices that categories within the device can be expected to engage in. For instance, in spite of broadly queer attempts to change it, the MCD ‘sex’ is routinely regarded and used as a set with two categories (male and female) and activities or predicates that can be attached to them. People use the device to recognise (generate descriptions of) not only instances of ‘men’ and ‘women’ but of all sorts of supposed anomalies like ‘a men who look like a women’, ‘freaks’, people who ‘don’t know if they are men or women’ and so on.

That MCDs look like everyday, unremarkable methodological devices is much of the point. They are part of the stock of peoples’ everyday methods for making ordered and intelligible social worlds, such that they can get done the proper business of these social worlds (whatever it may be). As an example of community-as-MCD, I turn to the perspicuous case of the *Perth Gay Community Periodic Survey* of 2004.

**Surveying the ‘Perth Gay Community’**

This is one of a series of periodic surveys of male to male sexual practice undertaken by Macquarie University’s National Centre in HIV Social Research (NCHSR) and others since the late 1990s. In this instance, the others include the WA AIDS Council (WAAC), the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research (University of New South Wales) and the WA Centre for Health Promotion Research. Those surveyed were asked a number of questions, including how many men they had
sex with in the six months prior to the survey, details of the frequency and particulars of their sexual practice, the status of their sex partners (that is, were they ‘casual’ or ‘regular’) and their HIV status.

Whilst the survey’s findings are interesting in their own right, my interest is with a prior matter – how it is that questions such as these could even be asked. In the course of everyday life, asking strangers for details of their sexual practice rarely counts as competent social interaction. This is not to say that there are no courses of action in which making such requests is reasonably mundane practice, including some medical consultations and sex work inquiries. My point, however, is that when such questions are asked, they are asked, as it were, under licence. Permission to ask the questions is worked up and displayed in the interaction.

Here, we begin to see the strategic, situated production and use of ‘community’ – as the name of a device used to establish a more than adequate warrant for asking otherwise unaskable questions. Indeed, the survey reports a response rate of around seventy percent. Of the 1041 men questioned in the survey, 760 filled in the required form.

In EMCA terms, the survey is a form of interaction between two parties, in which the identities of those involved are made intelligible in the course of the interaction. Critically, they are made intelligible in such a way as to provide for the logic of ‘asking’ and ‘answering’ particular questions. Parties are identified such that the very act of identifying, or of choosing a specific form of identification, allows for the desired ‘next move’.

As is to be expected, this introductory identification work is evident at the very beginning of the survey. At the top of the page, candidate respondents learn that there are five named parties to the interaction: the WA AIDS Council, the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, the WA Centre for Health Promotion Research, the National Centre in HIV Social Research, and the Perth Gay Community. What is the relationship between these bodies and what sort of work does the implied relationship do? What, in other words, are those surveyed meant to infer from this ensemble of identifications, and on what basis, such they can determine whether or not they should answer the questions?
The answer lies in the locatability or intelligibility of these named bodies as members of categories of particular collections rather than on the basis of any inherent properties they may possess as singular entities. In other words, people reading the survey read the bodies as instances of social categories. Although there are five named bodies in the survey, the first four are accountably some form of the same category. The other body is not. Another way of saying this is that the survey makes pertinent two categories. One category we may call, roughly, ‘HIV/AIDS-concerned public bodies’, the salient predicate being, in this instance, interest in same-sex sexual practice. The other category is ‘Gay Community’. Scanning through the questions, it becomes apparent that there are many possible predicates for this category, but one is that they must have ‘had sex with another man in the past five years’. It is these predicates that make the parties to the interaction hearable as being co-locatable in one device. They commonsensically ‘belong together’. This device, I propose, is in fact ‘gay community’: the ‘gay community’ is talking to a part of itself. This, at least, is the version of the world being formulated here.

As part of his work on MCDs, Sacks’ identified a number of different types. Two of these, which he called Collections (MCDs) ‘R’ and ‘K’, and are relevant to the discussion here. The former, ‘R’, collects paired relational categories ‘that constitutes a locus for a set of rights and obligations concerning the activity of giving help’ (Sacks 1972: 37). These include pairs of categories like friend-friend, neighbour-neighbour, girlfriend-boyfriend, girlfriend-girlfriend and so on. When one category in the pair is accountably absent in an interaction, this absence constitutes what Sacks calls a pertinent absence. An R-type MCD can be used, then, to generate such things as complaints that one is ‘all alone’, even as this complaint is said to another person.

Collections ‘K’, on the other hand, are collections of ‘categories of “experts” who offer specialised help with particular “troubles”’. In Sacks’ (1972: 37) words, such a Collection is ‘constructed by reference to special distributions of knowledge existing about how to deal with some trouble’. Collections K include doctor-patient, lawyer-client, priest-parishioner, social worker-client, teacher-student and so on. Importantly, Collections K also imply some form of domination relationship. That is, unlike Collection R, Collections K collects categories of person that occupy hear-ably unequal social positions, especially in relation to the production and distribution of knowledge. It is, however, not at all unusual for a Collection K to attempt to pass
itself off as some form of Collection R, to foreground, for instance, the ‘friendship’ basis of a professional relationship, or by otherwise making claims of ‘all being equal here’.

Such is the case with this survey. The questions about sex questions are asked in the language of ‘the everyday’, or rather, pointedly not asked in the everyday language of science. That is, the bodies asking the questions ‘speak’ just like ‘anyone would’ if they were a ‘gay community member’. Specifically, whilst the survey is designed to elicit data concerning sexual acts, it does not ask about the incidences of ‘intercourse’, ‘oral sex’, ‘ejaculation’ and so on that are found in its Report; it asks about ‘fucking’, ‘sucking’, ‘coming’ and other predicates that any ‘gay community member’ would be expected to do or so identify. One neat feature is that the basis of the claim to co-membership, then, is a procedural principle that goes something like ‘I do as you do when I am in the same circumstances as you’. This includes identifying objects and actions.

‘Gay community’, then, is accountable as a Collection R, the paired relational categories of which are ‘community-member’ to ‘community-member’ and, as such, have certain rights and obligations regarding help. Here, we see an instance of a category, something like ‘organizations dedicated to HIV/AIDS research and prevention’ making itself visible and reportable as some version of quotidian queer ‘helper’ body. Whilst HIV/AIDS-related organisations may not be able to be pass themselves off as instances of a particular category of person – as ‘gay men’ or ‘men who have sex other men’ – they may nonetheless make a claim to be accountable as members of ‘the gay community’ at least on some occasions (such as this).

Although, then, WAAC and the three other health bodies can be identified as forms of ‘professional organizations’, the ‘puzzle’ of how to determine the sort of entity they are, as faced by respondents at the start of the survey, is retrospectively ‘solved’ reading the list of predicates (fucking, sucking etc). The occasioned choice of these predicates, rather than those used in the survey’s report, means that respondents can identify the surveyors as somehow one of us or, at least, in a category very adjacent to ‘us’.

The collective entity this survey was design to elicit answers from could have been identified in numerous ways. It could have been a survey of ‘sometimes homosexually
active men’ or of ‘men who have sex with men’. Neither of these, however, would do – it is doubtful they would get the response rate and data of the ‘gay community’ survey. Clearly, the first is not hearable as ‘probably gay friendly’. It is most certainly a Category K utterance. The second is hearable as gay friendly, but again, as probably bound to some Category K incumbent organisation. In using ‘community’, however, the surveying organisations use a collecting device in which they can locate themselves in some version of a Category R relationship, making themselves overwhelming hearable as ‘one of us’, with all the interactive rights and obligations that implies.

What is extraordinary, of course, is that the entity in question – the community – is an indivisible product-resource of the interaction. The interaction formulates-and-uses the device ‘the community’ as an ethicalised body, such that it can be interviewed, surveyed, consulted and, importantly, in which membership can be claimed, for whatever purposes such claiming makes possible.

Although ‘community’ is routinely used by professional bodies and theorists as a disinterested descriptor, there is clearly something else afoot, some set of reasons which exceed the need for accurate description in its deployment. I have suggested that, in this instance, the need is fundamental to the task – the need for an organization to formulate a social interaction such that it gets done the very stuff of that interaction – producing a sound, acceptable warrant to ask its questions. The point is not to berate organizations that use ‘community’, either for this or any other purpose. Rather, the point is to investigate how such activities are achieved and what role mundane devices such as ‘community’ may play.

My point in undertaking this brief investigation of ‘community’ is not to adjudicate arguments concerning the bounds of community, or to advocate for or against its use. Disputing or defending the ‘reality’ of community is even further from my aim. Although I argue against the notion that persons or collections of persons exists independently of the ways in which they are made intelligible, this is not an issue of truth or reality but of plausibility and use. To use Garfinkel’s (2002: 99) terms, at issue is the way in which the haecceities or situated ‘just-thinness’ of social facts or entities is worked up in, and as part of, any course of events. Clearly, ‘community’ exists as a social fact, if for no other reason than it is routinely oriented to in everyday interaction. The issue is what sort of social fact it may turn out to be. As I have
suggested here, the problem’ with ‘community’ may be the persistent neglect by social theorists of ‘community’ as inter-active resource rather than effect.

References


