Editors' Introduction

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Community and its fate has become a focal point of attention for those concerned about the social changes wrought by the forces of modernity. Numerous commentators have argued that neglecting to foster and support community interaction and involvement may have deleterious social consequences. This argument has been most forcefully (and controversially) articulated by Robert Putnam who focuses on the disappearance of civic togetherness – in terms of everyday community based practices such as participation in meetings and local organisations, church attendance and voting – in the United States. The impact of this decline in civic togetherness, he concludes, diminishes social capital and undermines community (Putnam, 2000).

Much of the current debate about community is concerned with whether or not the term can be meaningful in the age of globalisation. Some analysts argue that society and economy are no longer organised around local relations, and that identities are increasingly formed through engagement in 'virtual communities'. Simonsen, for example, suggests that 'it is meaningless in modern urban contexts to talk about communities in the sense of self-sufficient social units' (1997: 171). On the other hand, there is considerable evidence from empirical investigation that local attachments based on familiarity with place and personal social relations persist, bearing out the argument that much of human experience does not transcend but rather continues to be bound by time and space constraints.

Given the increasingly loose way in which the term community is deployed both within and outside of academia, our understanding of what constitutes community has become confused. It is almost impossible to proffer a single workable definition, and perhaps pointless to try: G. A. Hillery famously identified 94 half a century ago (1955)! It is perhaps more fruitful, at least as a starting point, to approach 'community' contextually, understanding it in terms of its spatiality, but also in terms of communities of interest, politics or culture, which cohere – and may be divided, as in the case of 'the two communities' in Northern Ireland – on the basis of identities, values and belongingness. Community can also be understood as an object of government, as a particular form of human and social capital, and as an agent for the revitalisation of civil society. This volume explores some of the many

and varied configurations of community in Ireland today. The papers collected here collectively offer a range of insights on community, including critical re-appraisals of the idea of community and the concept of social capital with which it is so often bracketed; an exploration of the notion of virtual communities in the Irish context; a dissection of the forces at work on the ground which give rise to a communal sense of belonging that acts as a basis for collective self-identification and collective action, and finally, an evaluation of a programme designed to enhance community in a post-conflict border region.

The classical theorists who remain a touchstone for contemporary discussions of community constitute a point of departure for this volume. Andreas Hess reflects on the contribution of Helmuth Plessner's classic *The Limits of Community* to sociological theorising on community. Plessner wrote his book originally as a critique of Tönnies' *Community and Society*, and Hess points to its prescient analysis of how a term such as community can be corrupted and harnessed by dystopian forces in society. Plessner was highly critical of the reasoning about communities in Tönnies work, and in particular, challenged the deployment of the rhetoric of community to gloss over more modern practices of role-taking and the development of more anonymous forms of public life. Given the contemporary fixation on community as a panacea for a range of societal ills, it behoves social scientists to engage with the term from a critical and reflexive standpoint.

It is difficult to uncouple contemporary discussions of community from the concept of social capital. Robert Putnam's assertion that a decline in social capital leads to a decline in community has become a cornerstone of popular thinking, and – that rare thing for a sociological concept – has resonated in the corridors of power. Planners, policy-makers and politicians now regularly pay lip service to the idea of social capital, and deploy the term strategically to appease their critics. Tom Healy noted the multi-dimensional character of social capital, the difficulties with its measurement and the plurality of research approaches it has invited in the pages of the *Irish Journal of Sociology* (2004). Here, Clare Farrell outlines what social capital is and how it is often understood in popular contemporary debate, particularly in the context of Putnam's work. She traces some of the key theo-retical origins from which the concept has emerged, revisiting the work of Coleman and Bourdieu who are frequently cited as key influences. Farrell examines the manner in which social capital has been taken up in policy terms and assesses the implications of its widespread endorsement as a solution for a variety of social problems. Having identified the complex conceptual, methodological and empirical issues which surround the concept, Farrell underlines the need for caution when invoking social capital as a research tool or a policy intervention. In conclusion she alludes to the highly contested role of social capital in the significant body of work relating to socio-economic health inequalities in contemporary society.

In a complementary contribution, Eileen Humphreys critiques the concept of social capital from an empirical standpoint. Having outlined the core conceptual considerations, she devises a series of measurements of social capital and applies

these in local territorial communities. The focus of her research is to explore the relationship between social capital and quality of life in four different disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. Humphreys' findings are both complex and insightful and cast further doubt on the usefulness of the concept of social capital as a measure of community well-being. Variations in levels of social capital in neighbourhoods are associated with both compositional and contextual conditions of place. Certain socio-economic characteristics of individuals and communities, including higher levels of education and home ownership, are positively associated with social capital. Better conditions of place such as good quality local services and a developed community and social infrastructure are also positively associated with social capital. However, this does not mean that the problems of disadvantaged neighbourhoods can be attributed simply to deficits of social capital or certain types of social capital – i.e. bridging and linking social capital. Humphreys argues that a more sophisticated understanding of the conditions that shape social capital and that are shaped by it in specific spatial contexts is required, before considering the deployment of social capital as a policy tool.

There is no doubt that new technologies are enabling people to communicate with an increased range of other individuals and to participate in a variety of new as well as traditional groups. But do new technologies contribute to a decline in individuals' participation in localities or do they enable 'virtual communities' to expand and flourish as electronic manifestations of more traditional-type communities? More specifically, to what extent can new technologies be deployed to increase the number of people who participate in activities and groups in their own locality? These are some of the questions posed by Lee Komito in the preamble to his discussion of government supported e-technology initiatives. Reviewing the impact of e-technologies on citizens' participation, he points to the limitations of 'virtual communities' as replacements for local communities. Evidence suggests that groups whose members communicate only electronically lack some of the features that characterise local communities. Furthermore, new technologies tend to intensify existing contacts within localities, especially by those already active in their localities. However, if the goal is to increase the number of people who get involved, there is less evidence that new technologies can provide this benefit. A current Irish government initiative (*Mohbaile*), which is concerned with both e-government and e-participation is documented and assessed. A key shortcoming identified by Komito is the lack of integration of these two functions (government and participation): online links are either non-existent or hard to navigate. The lack of effective government support, locally and nationally, for technologies that encourage participation and inclusion is linked with the relative lack of impact of *Mobhaile* over a two-year pilot period.

While Komito focuses on the creation (actual or potential) of e-communities in the public sphere, O'Connor and MacKeogh concern themselves with how an online women's magazine acts as a communal space for the inscription and sharing of private intimacies by a core group of contributors. The authors explore

the possibility of developing and sustaining a sense of community in a virtual world where face-to-face communication is either absent or limited. The paper draws on an analysis of the content of an Internet discussion board that developed a community of users based primarily on a shared gender identity. They examine the strategies that the participants use to create and maintain a sense of shared interests, purpose and trust, and explore the constraints and potentialities of the technology; the commercial interests that support the discussion board; and the role the discussion board plays for participants.

In spite of the evolution of virtual communities and the pervasive influence of globalising forces, 'community life' in twenty-first century Ireland may well remain the preserve of locality and place. This is according to Michael Murray, who suggests that claims by some authors, particularly supporters of the 'cosmopoli-tanisation' thesis, exaggerate the effects of transnational processes on communities, basing their arguments on an *a priori,* and vague, characterisation of the 'local' and the 'cosmopolitan' (Roudometof, 2005). Individuals and communities who refuse or are unable to enter into the cosmopolitan agenda run the risk of being labeled as backward, insular, and closed. They are 'traditionalists' (or even 'unfashionable') in this age of globalisation. Murray argues that it is erroneous to dismiss the importance of locality or the social construction of 'place', particularly in relation to community-based protest. He rejects the deployment of binary oppositions – poorly defined polarities of 'local/national' versus 'global/cosmopolitan'- and argues for a more nuanced approach that recognises the ways in which locally based, collectivity-oriented communities can survive and thrive even as traditional community bonds may be eroding. Drawing on a case study of community resistance to plans to locate a municipal incinerator in Ringsend, Dublin, he documents the impact of transnational – or global – processes on that community. The promise or threat of the introduction of incineration into Ireland has largely been shaped by these transnational processes and discourses emanating from the European Union, multi-national corporations involved in the waste industry, and transnational Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), among others. While these discourses do inform the local community's frame of reference, it is concerns about the locality and the welfare of future generations of that community that are paramount for the residents featured in Murray's case study.

The significance of locality and notions of belonging are also major themes in Lisa Moran's paper, which examines insider/outsider distinctions in a rural community in Connemara. She argues that these distinctions are rooted in locality and are based upon conflicting knowledge cultures. Such distinctions are both contextual and fluid as they encompass a range of cultural factors and find expression through particular conventions regarding language use and everyday behavioural strategies. The insider/outsider nexus is continually negotiated in this community, and individuals are recognised as possessing degrees of insider and/or outsider status depending upon which particular modes of behaviour or linguistic practices may be seen as acceptable by the wider community in particular social

situations. Evidence from Moran's empirical case study reveals that while some incomers to the region are viewed as 'outsiders' by more established members of the community, the degree to which this is the case frequently depends on whether they are perceived as sharing local people's 'habitus' prior to their entering the community. Instead of drawing strict lines of distinction between locals and incomers, both groups engage in regular 'boundary-making' by perpetuating locally-based practices and discourse structures, a process which verifies their sense of belonging and continually (re)defines and (re)constitutes the structures of discourse and action entered into in everyday life.

Recent government policies in Ireland and Britain propose community development as a useful approach to combating the unresolved social problems of poverty, disadvantage, inequality and discrimination, and form part of the context for the concluding paper by Rosemary Moreland. For many activists and workers in the community sector, it would appear that community development, like lifelong learning, is finally 'coming of age'! New forms of governance that encourage participation and partnership, empowerment and engagement, are taken by some to imply that radical changes are taking place in society. Ledwith (2005), however, warns that the assimilation of community development aims and goals into mainstream British politics, through notions of civil society, promotes a communitarian approach which views society as homogeneous. Likewise, Collins (2002) critiques the notion of civil society as being part of the state apparatus to coercively reach those groups that governments have been unable or unwilling to reach in the past. Certainly, significant elements of the community sector in the Republic have responded in a lukewarm way to recent developments aimed at promoting greater 'cohesion' between local development and community development.

Moreland's paper also explores the relationship between community development and community education, and contends that increased collaboration and the blurring of boundaries between formal, non-formal and informal adult learning presents a new challenge for adult educators, community workers, activists and governments; namely, to focus on 'life-wide learning', which takes as its starting point the knowledge and concerns of its participants. In addition, this paper examines the Borderlands Studies Initiative as one example of a formal adult education provider engaging with communities to deliver life-wide education for those who would not normally access adult education, and it outlines some of the difficulties and tensions inherent in this.

Whatever its nature, and whatever its state of health, the contributions to this volume would appear to confirm the view of Day and Murdoch (1993: 85) that community is a concept 'that will just not lie down'. They also confirm its complexity and contingency, and throw considerable light – from a range of perspectives – on the many conceptual uses and abuses both of 'community' and of other closely related concepts in contemporary sociology.

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