

Discussing Ideas of Community and  
Their Influence on Public Policy-Making

Allison S. Rosenberg

University of Delaware

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The ultimate equalizer among all human beings is the evident truth that we are all born into this physical world without any prior knowledge or life experiences. From the moment this condition of parentage expires, every individual first learns survival, and is then formally and informally socialized by the individuals with which one interacts. In time, individuals learn of their personal and societal identity and experience that are conditioned by those with similar characteristics. Interaction with others provides the practice one needs for inherently understanding expectations, responsibilities, and functions of the group. Eventually, with growing maturity, practice turns into understanding and acceptance. Individuals who began life equally unknowledgeable of their surroundings, now have developed individualized self-awareness, yet are different in their conceptions of their placement in society, with respect to language, culture, location, or societal interest. The theory of community, having multiple definitions itself, is used in determining the perspectives and worldview of its members, and brings attention to the experiences of the members and their commonalities. Crucial for politicians and policy makers is this notion of community, and its application within the decision-making process of public policy making. The understanding of membership and group orientation provides political actors with vital insight into the group dynamic, in order to reveal policy preferences. First to be discussed is Marilyn Taylor's explanation of the elements and levels of community composition, followed by my personal experiences and reflection on the concept of community will be demonstrated.

In her article "Public Policy in the Community," Taylor (2003) discusses the idea of community as a description and prescription to determine the context, meaning, and usage of the term community in the application of recognizing group identity. The descriptive element of

community provides policy makers the foundation to assess the group of people being identified and their common characteristics. But, it is the prescription of normative assumptions where the importance of the concept of community is of interest to policy makers. The normative view of community introduces the assumption of community as a place where participation and cohesion are found, in contrast to the descriptive view, where community is a term unifying those with common characteristics or interests (Taylor, 2003, p. 35). This normative view implies an adherence to certain expectations by the people belonging to a community. This goes beyond the descriptive usage by adding the element of individuals' identification with a community being a guiding principle to the interactions amongst other community members.

With this concept of community as an entity with assumed norms for interaction, it becomes more multifaceted when the element of functionality is introduced. It is from this concept of community as an instrumental body that my personal experiences in defining community originate. Community as an active agent, in my opinion, is the most crucial role of responsibility of a community. I identify myself as belonging to numerous communities, formed by various foundations. In a descriptive sense, my primary identification is that of the human race, as we are all members of one community, then as a United States citizen, and then as a Pennsylvanian. I identify myself as being a part of a community of location and residency, as a member of my hometown of Lafayette Hill, as well of the University of Delaware community of students, faculty, and surrounding interacting establishments, as we share common interests as citizens of these communities, in social, economic, educational, and political realms.

In Taylor's writing, "Ideas of Community," she is looking to define the term and concept of community, and has clearly developed definitions of components, theories and concepts. While citing numerous scholars on the topic, Hillery identified over ninety-four meanings of the term community and its development and organization (as cited in Taylor, 2003, p. 34). Community plays a large role in the indication of group identity and interest, as it is the formulation of ideas and interactions among the similarly socialized. A result of this importance of community is the need for politicians and policy makers to understand the context of a public issue, as seen by those affected. Policy makers, who understand the recognition of expectations discussed in the normative prescription of community can utilize this concept of social conformity to better understand the attributes and attitudes of those belonging to the community, and establish the most effective way to provide resolution to social problems. Identifying the

values of the community helps policy makers with understanding the intensity of perceived public problems to create policies for the common good. In respect to the natural conglomerate defining community, group identification occurs on many levels. Individuals may perceive membership as a superficial term, while others reinforce identity with adherence and promotion of cultural, societal, and characterizing behavior, exemplifying the collective engagement of those in social relationships.

References

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