

Exploring Community in the Balkan Context:
A Case Study in Albania and Kosovo

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Abstract

Throughout the history of mankind, community - defined herein as a group of people that share something in common - has been viewed as a foundational element of life, both for the well-being of individuals and for the growth and sustainability of political systems. Literature and empirical data suggest that communities are important for societies, as they provide its members with close, harmonious, and natural ties of kinship between people. In addition, communities offer knowledge, resources, and the organization needed to effect constructive change through census. In a democracy, the active participation of community members is a vital component of bringing about meaningful economic, political, and environmental progress. Therefore, without strong communal underpinnings, the type of civil society that is necessary in order to develop a stable and free democracy is impossible to achieve. In order to explore the role of communities, an inquiry was carried out with participants from Albania and from Kosovo, focusing on the meaning of the term “community” and the sense of community that is held. Perceptions of community are also examined, such as forms of participation, social support, and the level of importance placed upon the concept by those from different ethnic and geographic backgrounds. The similarities and differences discovered in the results are examined in light of potential mediating factors, such as cultural differences regarding the conceptualization of community. Further implications for policy and practice are also discussed.

Keywords: community, civil society, democracy, participation, social support

Introduction

Human beings are social creatures. The desire to take part in interactions with others can be seen across all stages of life and across all cultures on some level. These interactions allow exchanges of information, the development of ideas, the creation of institutions, and the building of societies. Communities, whether they consist of neighborhoods, schools, or internet chat rooms, are what allow and foster these vital interactions. Therefore, community is a vital part of human development (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986: 337).

The word “community” can have multiple meanings in the English language. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2012) defines community in multiple ways, ranging from “a unified body of individuals” to “a social state or condition.” Traditionally, a community has been viewed in the physical sense, as in a set geographic location (Bell & Newby, 1975: 19). Levine (1986) expands upon that definition, stating that community involves “membership, influence, reinforcement of needs, and shared emotional connection in time and space” (p. 83). But in each of these definitions, a common thread about what exists at the root of community can be seen – community is more than one individual sharing something in common.

Another important aspect of community that is essential to a complete understanding of the idea is the “sense of community.” McMillan and Chavis (1986) define the sense of community as the “feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Sense of community is important because it is what allows a community to function. Without a positive sense of community, the members of the community are not able to fully participate within it, and the community will in turn provide little to no benefit. Therefore, examining not only perceived definitions and understandings of community, but also how a person feels about their place in a community is an important aspect of this research.

Before one can attempt to devise a way in which a successful civil society can be built upon active and involved communities, an attempt to understand the meaning and perceptions of community must be made. Once the definition and how people view that definition is found, work can then begin on strengthening the existing communities, along with forming new ones, in order to foster a fruitful civil society. Given the major ongoing changes that the nations of the Balkans have been experiencing for over twenty years, and the goals that each nation currently has, the exploration of the meaning and understanding of community in the region is essential.

For this initial inquiry, Albania and Kosovo were chosen as two sites in which to explore the question of “What does community mean in the Albanian language?” The two locations share a common language and ethnic, but have many differences in their recent histories that may impact the perceptions held. Semi-structured interviews presented

significant insight into the direction that the study of community in the region can take, along with providing clues of what might need to be done in order to strengthen community and foster civil society. Implications for further research are discussed.

Literature

The definition of community, and in turn the way its study is approached, has varied over the years and across disciplines. When looking for a precise idea of what constitutes community, Gusfield (1975) notes that the definition of community can be broken down into two arenas – geographical and relational (p. 16). For many, the geographic definition of community often comes to mind first. This makes sense since the term is used to describe localities more often than relationships in the English language. But even then, the relational definition of community is what builds the geographical. Bell and Newby (1975) demonstrate this arrangement in their definition of community by calling it a “set of interrelationships among social institutions in a locality” (p. 19).

One of the earliest discussions in history of the critical role that community plays in society is found in Aristotle’s Politics – A Treatise on Government (2004). Throughout the text, Aristotle points out that in a community, people come together to enjoy mutual association, to fulfill their basic needs, and to find meaning in life. Each of these facets of community not only comprise major aspects of the day-to-day lives that people live, but they also form the foundation of society, of national identity, and of government. Aristotle speaks of various communities, including family, location, goods, defense, interests, and ethnicity. Throughout the text, he is describing the local groundwork upon which a society, a government, and a nation are built.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) contend that there are four basic components that make up community – membership (“feeling of belonging”), influence (“sense of mattering”), integration and fulfillment of needs (needs will be met through being a part of the community), and shared emotional connection (the sharing of commonalities) (p. 9). At a later point, McMillan (1996) expanded upon these four elements, providing a more extrapolated view of community with the terms spirit (membership), trust (influence), trade (integration and fulfillment of needs), and art (shared emotional connection). When the nature of community is broken down in such a way, it becomes easier to see how it is an integral part of forming a government, a city, a nation, a region, and the world.

Mannarini and Fedi (2009), attempting to understand community through the experiences of a cross section of people in Italy via semi-structured interviews, found that the participant’s views on the term and their sense of community did not vary greatly from widely accepted definitions and understandings of the two (p. 223). It also further served to show that community is comprised of a “complexity of narratives” that are not easily “reduced to simple, unidimensional models” (p. 224). The role that culture plays in impacting not only the understanding of community, but also the feelings of ties to communities, is also prevalent.

A strong feeling of community, as necessary and desired as it is for people, is not without its potentially negative outcomes. Dunne (1986) notes that historically there are

several examples of how a “strong communal identity” can bring about undesirable events (p. 53). Ethnic conflicts often arise out of feelings of community superiority, as do wars over national superiority, and division along socioeconomic lines. In order to avoid these issues, communities must be viewed as a means of not only offering support to those within, but also as a means of interacting with those in other communities.

Background

The Albanian word that comes closest to the meaning of the word community in English is “bashkësia.” As with its English counterpart, bashkësia has can represent the commonality or existence of mutual traits between two or more things. In the Albanian language, one can speak of a linguistic bashkësi, economic bashkësi, territorial bashkësi, international bashkësi, or bashkësi of elements (e.g., in math). Therefore, the definition of bashkësia can be said to be the same as the definition of community, comprising both locational and relational attributes.

However, particularly in Kosovo, the word community is used as a synonym for the word minority far more often than it is English. While there is certainly usage of the word community in reference to minorities in the English language, people are not as likely to automatically jump to that definition as they are in Kosovo. As a result, the term community operates on two levels in Kosovar society. On the first level, it has the ordinary meaning of a group of people that share something in common, such as ethnicity, religion, culture, or language. Within this meaning, communities refer to all ethnic and religious groups-regardless of whether they are majority or minority. On the second level, in both Albania and Kosovo, the term is used specifically in reference to minority communities, particularly those who are not of Albanian ethnicity, including Serbs, Roma, Egyptians, Ashkali, Turks, Bosniaks, Gorani, and Croats. The use of the term in this fashion is seen in all levels of society, including amongst government officials (Radio Televizion i Kosovës, 2010). Thus, the practice of using the term community in place of the term minority is commonly understood in Kosovo.

The understanding of community, along with the sense of community that is held by individuals, is something that has yet to be explored in any great detail in Albania and Kosovo. The desire throughout the region to move forward, out of recent conflict and political strife, make the study of community vitally important. Any moves forward must start at the local level with individuals who are a part of communities. In this research, initial inquiries are made about the possibility of further studying communities throughout the region.

Methods

The main purpose of this inquiry was to examine the meaning of the term community Albanian language and sense of community held in the region. In this, questions about the importance of ethnic communities, geographic communities, and community associations are raised, along with the exploration of the most common forms of participation and social support among the Albanian and Kosovar populations.

The sample was a convenient sample. Ten semi-structured cognitive interviews were conducted with Albanians and Kosovars via Skype and/or e-mail. The majority of

participants were college students. The gender separation fell upon equal lines. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were provided with a summary of the study via e-mail. The summary provided information about the study, the importance of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

The questionnaire used was based on the questionnaire devised by Mannarini and Fedi (2009). Additional questions were added in order to gather more information that is specific to the region. The questionnaire was originally written in English and then translated into. To ensure accuracy in the translation, the questionnaire was then translated back into English. Responses were recorded in a written format during the interviews. The average interview lasted approximately 35 minutes.

The open-ended semi-structured interview aimed to explore the concept of community and sense of community, its meaning in the Albanian language, as well as different forms of participation, social support, information, emotions, behaviors and activities. Participants were first asked to describe what came to mind when they thought of the term “community” and also to specify which community they were referring to. In addition, participants were asked to focus on the three types of communities that included: 1) ethnic community; 2) geographic community; and 3) associations such as churches or mosques, schools, work, and professional careers. The same probes were used for each type of community and they included a) the area they lived in, if they would define it as a community, and why or why not; b) the activities that took place in it, and the elements (people, organization, and places) they think it is composed of; c) the importance of their participation; d) the type of information they were able to; e) social networks or social bonds that could arise from their participation; f) meaning they were likely to attribute to the expression “sense of community” g) emotions, thoughts, and behaviors related to sense of community; and h) their views on the characteristics of what they think a “good community” looks like.

Results

There was significant overlap in the responses from participants. This showed a common understanding of community and sense of community amongst those interviewed. These commonalities were not surprising, and should hopefully lend themselves to addressing the issue of community across a wider base of participants in the future. The first question asked about their familiarity with the term “community” in English and the equivalent word that can be used to describe this term in the Albanian language. Some examples of responses are as follows:

- “I know the term community in English and the closest term in Albanian would be **bashkësia**.”
- “I have heard about the term community in English but I am not sure what term I would use to describe it in the Albanian language. Maybe “**rrethi**” can be the most relevant term.” (*The term “rrethi” literally means circle, but based on the context of the conversation it is interpreted as a close group of people, such as a “circle of friends.”*)
- “I will assume it is “**lagje**.” (The term “lagje” in the Albanian language has the same meaning as the word “neighborhood” in English.)

- “I heard about this term and **“bashkësi”** is the equivalent word for the term community in the Albanian language.”
- “I have heard people using this term and I assume that the word **“bashkësi”** would describe best the term community in English.”

The responses indicate that the term “bashkësi” can be used for explaining the term community in Albanian as the majority of participants used this term while others used synonyms. Therefore, the definition of the word community in the Albanian language appears to hold the same multi-faceted definition that it does in the English language, applying to both interactions on a geographic and on a relational level.

The next set of questions explored the meaning of the “ethnic community” and probes that were used looked at identity, social support, behaviors or activities, and emotions. Participants were then asked to rank functions that were most important for them on a scale of 1 to 5. When asked about the elements that constituted communities, participants mentioned sharing their ethnicity, culture, food, norms, and customs. When asked about the factors that contributed to their identity, participant responses discussions of feeling connected in a psychological way with their backgrounds, and that it “makes me closer to my family and friends back home.” When asked about social networks or social bonds that can arise, participants noted friendships, connectedness, and information about social and political issues. Information gathered about political and social situations throughout the Albanian-speaking regions of the Balkans were discussed frequently.

When asked about the elements that constitute their geographic communities, more than half of participants mentioned knowing their neighbors, while others did not consider their neighborhoods as a community. Even within the discussion of geographic communities, the importance of relational communities could clearly be seen throughout the responses:

- “The neighborhood that I live [in] is mixed and I don’t have anything in common with them. If I lived in a neighborhood where Albanians lived I would considered it as a community.”
- “The neighborhood I live is predominantly Catholics and I don’t have nothing in common with them. I am Muslim.”

The following set of questions inquired about association, such as houses of worship, school, work, and professional career. When participants were asked about elements of associations they mentioned “getting together”, “sharing the same interests”, and “religious associations.” When asked about factors that contributed to their identity and the influence it has, participants offered diverse perspectives such as “helps me to socialize with others,” “helps me to keep my Albanian identity and to appreciate my values,” and to “learn more about my religion.” When asked about the social networks or social bonds, majority of participants mentioned friendships. When asked about activities that take place, half of participants mentioned academic activities, fund-raising activities, and community service.

When asked about what a “good community” should look like participants offered unique descriptions:

- “To summarize with one sentence - a good community is like a small state within a big state.”

- “Where problems can be solved through collaboration, where people can share their emotions without being judged, and where everyone has a positive behavior.”
- “A good community is where people engage actively and try to involve other people, where they have a voice, and where different activities for children, families, and elderly take place.”
- “Offering psychological and social support, helping others to find a job or helping when someone is going through a financial crisis, showing tolerance toward others, and willing to say I am sorry or I was wrong. For this to happen, a good leader is needed.”

Discussion and further research

This inquiry provides several more details about the meaning of the word “community” and “sense of community” in the Albanian language. As the results indicated, the majority of participants used the term “bashkësi” to describe the English term community. When examining different types of communities, the results showed that ethnic community was more important when compared to geographic community or associations. In addition, the results provided unique perspectives about forms of participation, social support, information, emotions, behaviors, and activities that occur in each type of communities.

One of the most important aspects of the results is that particular attention must be paid to the feelings of ethnic community in the two regions. While ethnic ties are relevant across all cultures when examining community, they appear to be particularly pronounced in Kosovo as well as in Albania. In English usage, “minority” or “ethnic” is most often attached to the word community when discussing various groups of people, in Albanian the same word is often used interchangeably.

The study of community in Albania and Kosovo, as well as throughout the Balkans, is of particular importance. As previously noted, communities are a vital part of human development (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986: 337). Part of understanding humanity is understanding the way in which people live and interact. The vast majority of interactions are conducted through various types of community. Therefore an understanding of community helps to foster an understanding of people.

An understanding of communities is also vital in building civil society. The development of civil society is something that is of the utmost importance to many of the nations of the Balkans for a variety of reasons. First, civil society promotes the involvement of citizens in the workings of the nation and of the region. Second, civil society is necessary in order for democracy to flourish. And third, on an international level, promoting civil society is a key part of the European Union accession process. Civil society can take many shapes and forms, and is impacted greatly by culture, therefore attempting to understand the way in which community is viewed will lend great insight into how to form an appropriate, and lasting, civil society within a nation. Since the ancient Greeks, the importance that communities play in democracy and in the building of nations has been recognized. With both Albania and Kosovo being relatively newly-established, it is crucial to examine the role played by communities. Any such examination is important not only to the

development of both nations, but also to all nations throughout the Balkans. It is also an important part of integration into the family of the European Union.

This inquiry shows that the ground for research of this topic in the Balkans is fertile. The questionnaire used in this research elicited answers that help form a better understanding of how community is viewed by the participants, and so it is believed that similar research conducted on a broader scale will help to bring about a much more complete understanding of the topic. A next step would be moving beyond individual interviews into focus groups with Albanians and Kosovars regarding the meaning and understanding of both community and sense of community. These focus groups will bring about more in-depth discussion, and will allow for further comparison of perspectives.

New questions and prompts will need to be added to the questionnaire in order to foster further discussion among focus groups, particularly when looking at how community relates to larger political issues such as civil society and accession into the European Union. The questions asked in this inquiry focused more on definitions and perceptions rather than on their usefulness and application. Further questions would help to bring the two together, producing far more useful results for further study. Focus groups will also assist in refining the wording of the questions and prompts used, ensuring that they are accurately addressing the issues in the study.

Additionally, these focus groups would present the opportunity to include participants from across various age ranges, employment fields, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is very likely that individuals who are older and younger will have slightly differing views not only about what community means, but also about what role it does play and will play at local, national, regional, and global levels. A large cross section of participants would provide a window into how people from all walks of life understand community. Such results are crucial to any future action that might come about as a result.

Conclusion

Without communities, there would be no way for a society to function. They represent an essential aspect of the human experience and of human development. Regardless of culture, it appears that the same basic understanding of community exists around the world, with it being comprised of two major aspects – geographic community and relational community. In Albania and Kosovo, these previous findings appear to hold true. This is important for the further study of community in the region because it provides a foundation upon which further research can be conducted.

But the findings also show that different countries, regions, and cultures place varying levels of importance on the different aspects of community. While the basic definition and understanding of the term may remain virtually the same, the way in which it is approached can be quite different. These differences, however small they may seem, can mean the difference between success and failure on a variety of issues. That is why the study of the understanding of community and the sense of community that is held by people in different nations and regions is of great importance. Understanding one of the fundamental elements of society – community – is a critical part of the foundation for future development.

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