

## *Viewpoint*

# **The Transformation of ‘Community’ in the Australian Football League. Part One: Towards a Conceptual Framework For Community**

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. . . the most active problems of meaning are always primarily embedded in actual relationships (Williams, 1983, p. 22).

The previous issue of this journal was devoted to exploring the complex relationships that exist between football, media, identities and communities. Two of the articles – Dave Nadel’s ‘What is a football community?’ and Chris McConville’s ‘Footscray, identity and football history’ – discuss these issues in the context of the Australian Football League (AFL). These contributions anticipate themes that feature in a recently released collection entitled *More Than A Game* (Hess & Stewart, 1998) and they follow in the wake of a number of recent publications tackling related matters (Lack, McConville, Small & Wright, 1996; Pascoe, 1995; Stewart., Hess & Dixon, 1997). Taken together, these works suggest a growing academic interest in the complex relationship that exists between the AFL and community.

These offerings notwithstanding, there remains a paucity of detailed and critical community studies centred around AFL football. Most of the available sources that do deal with community aspects of the AFL – including the majority of official club histories – lack both conceptual clarity and theoretical rigour.<sup>1</sup> In part, this may be explained by the desire of the authors and/or publishers to appeal to a broad, non-specialist readership.<sup>2</sup> As McConville (1998) argues in relation to the Western (formerly Footscray) Bulldogs, it may also reflect the goals of powerful individuals and groups at a given club, who wish to construct or ‘invent’ a particular kind of club tradition to advance their own interests. Whatever the reasons, the consequence is that the complex and dynamic relationship between the AFL and ‘community’ is yet to be fully examined and adequately explained.

Of the recent publications on community in the AFL, the article by Nadel is to be welcomed for its explicit recognition of the problematic nature of the concept of community. At the outset, he demonstrates that the term is employed

in a variety of ways by journalists, politicians, academics and football administrators, and he goes on to indicate that he will clarify what these different people *mean* when they speak of a 'football community' (Nadel, 1998, p. 59). However, despite raising several challenging questions and making a number of insightful observations, Nadel falls short of this stated goal. Moreover, his paper never clearly defines what *he* means by a 'football community'. In short, the relationship between football and community is successfully 'problematised', but remains insufficiently clarified.

From a sociological point of view, Nadel's analysis would have benefited from a greater conceptual precision, coupled with an explicit framework for grasping the historical changes in the club-community nexus. Regrettably, the omission of these features is characteristic of most writing on the relationship between football and community, and it stems primarily from a failure to satisfactorily distil the vast body of sociological writing dealing with the concept of 'community'. A central contention of this two-part article is that within this very literature lies the key to providing a solid basis for teasing out the nature: and more particularly the *changing* nature, of 'community' in the AFL.

The primary purpose of this part of this article is to apply a critical sociological perspective to advance our understanding of the concept of community. Specifically, it sets out to accomplish two main tasks. Firstly, by drawing on and extending the sociological literature on 'community', the initial aim is to clarify this problematic yet important concept. This involves identifying and critically outlining the four major conceptions of 'community' found in the sociological literature, and then briefly addressing the question of overlap between them. The second task is to put forward a conceptual framework capable of grasping and illuminating possible historical shifts in the nature and experience of 'community'. Here, the work of Raymond Williams (1977) will be tapped, and specifically his threefold schema of dominant, emergent, and residual social forces.

In Part Two of this article which will appear in the next issue of *Football Studies*, the conceptual framework outlined below will be systematically applied to explain the transformation of 'community' in the AFL throughout the post-war period. This will necessitate a consideration of broad changes to the structure of Australian society, in addition to discussing the specific changes that have occurred in the organisation and operation of the AFL. The intention is to offer a complementary analysis to that provided by Nadel, and to put forward a solid conceptual foundation for much-needed future research into the *minutiae* of the club-community nexus in the AFL.

## Conceptualising 'Community'

The word 'community' has been in the English language since the fourteenth century, and as a concept it has a long and complicated tradition in social theory and sociology (Williams, 1983). Regrettably, this tradition receives limited attention in Nadel's article, where it is skimmed over in a mere two paragraphs. This brief coverage indicates that Nadel has 'retreated from the world of sociology' with undue haste. Whilst few would fail to empathise with the difficulties and frustration involved in coming to grips with an unfamiliar discipline, in this case a premature 'retreat' has the unfortunate consequence of resulting in a lack of conceptual clarity that mars the remainder of the argument. Whilst it is clearly well beyond the scope of this article to do full justice to the vast sociological literature on community, it is possible to systematically sift through this literature in order to identify the main conceptions of the term.<sup>3</sup>

For those interested in grasping the meaning and significance of community in the modern world, the exhaustive sociological literature on the topic presents an ambivalent legacy. On the one hand, it provides an accumulated stock of knowledge – both theoretical and empirical – that can help to inform and guide current research. On the other, it presents a daunting and seemingly unmanageable range of definitions and interpretations. Indeed, it has become almost obligatory to open an account on community by citing George Hillery's 1955 study, in which he identifies more than ninety definitions of community, with the only common denominator being an emphasis on people. To make matters worse, all too often writers covertly conflate a number of separate dimensions of community into a single definition, or confuse their accounts by mixing together empirical description with normative prescription (Lee & Newby, 1983, pp. 56-7).

In response to this definitional avalanche and conceptual muddle, a number of high-profile theorists – including George Hillery himself – have gone so far as to suggest that we abandon the concept of 'community' altogether (Wild, 1981, p. 27). Jettisoning 'community' from one's conceptual framework, however, is *not* an acceptable response to the problem due to the fact that it comprises what Raymond Williams has called a 'keyword'.<sup>4</sup> For Williams (1983, p. 14), this means that 'community' is a pivotal term that forms part of '... the vocabulary we share with others, often imperfectly, when we wish to discuss many of the central processes of our common life'. A 'keyword', therefore, does more than simply signify an aspect of reality – it reflects and embodies ongoing conflicts and tensions inherent in social and historical development. As a consequence of this complex character, 'keywords' often have multiple, overlapping meanings. Crucially, however, this should be seen as a stimulus to intellectual activity rather than a deterrent, as an analysis of this very multiplicity and overlap will provide insights into the nature and trajectory of societal change

(Williams, 1983). It is in this context that Williams (1983, p. 24) remarks that where 'keywords' are concerned, 'variations and confusions of meaning are not just faults in a system or errors of feedback, or deficiencies of education. They are in many cases . . . historical and contemporary substance'.

Given the status of 'community' as a 'keyword', it is not enough to simply note and complain about the hopelessly vague nature of the term, and then to proceed to either abandon it altogether, or to employ it in a haphazard or imprecise manner. Nor should one try to explain away the different meanings, by opting for a single definition and dismissing the remainder. Instead, the challenge is to bring some order to this conceptual chaos – that is, to retain the term but at the same time to clarify and analyse its range of meanings. Thankfully, as numerous writers have noted, this task is simplified by the fact that the plethora of available definitions of community tend to cluster around a small number of central axes (Bell & Newby, 1971; Crow & Allen, 1994; Lee & Newby, 1983; Lynn, 1994; Wild, 1981; Worsley, 1987). Distilling this literature, we can identify four basic conceptions of community:

- 1) community as a geographical locale
- 2) community as a social system
- 3) community as a sense of identity and/or belonging
- 4) community as an ideology

Let us briefly elaborate upon each of these conceptions in turn.

When community is defined as *a geographical locale* we are dealing with a spatial categorisation – that is, community as a human settlement situated in a fixed, bounded locality (Worsley, 1987). As Lee and Newby (1983) note, this territorial conception of community has more in common with geography than sociology, as it fails to capture the social dimension which is the hallmark of the latter discipline. Normally then, sociologists are not only interested in where people reside, or what territory they occupy, but more importantly in *how* and *with whom* they interact.

For this reason, sociologists typically combine their emphasis on locality with a detailed analysis of social interaction, which leads to the second main conception of community in the sociological literature – *community as a social system*. Here, the focus is on the relationships and the networks of social interaction in which people participate. For some sociologists, a genuine community is a wholly self-contained entity, meaning that people's social interactions *must* take place exclusively within a specified geographical area. For other sociologists, however, the emphasis is on the social system *regardless* of the geographical or territorial context. The latter approach is becoming more common, as fewer people come to work and live the whole of their lives in a single

suburb or neighbourhood. Either way, it is important to note that the conception of community as a social system does not take into account the actual content or quality of social interactions, but merely the fact that they occur (Lee & Newby, 1983; Worsley, 1987).

The questions of content and quality in social relationships are bound up with the third conception of community – *community as a sense of identity and/or belonging*. In this case, we are moving away from an objective, structural definition of community, and towards a subjective interpretation. Here, questions of meaning and feeling come to the fore, such that the quality and not just the quantity of relationships are taken into account. This conception of community is often referred to in the sociological literature as ‘*communion*’, and it hinges upon the existence of a ‘feeling’ or a ‘spirit’ of community (Wild, 1981, p. 40; Worsley, 1987, p. 240).

Importantly, communion does not simply emerge spontaneously from a given set of relationships, but needs to be actively shaped and experienced by the participants involved. When these feelings are shared to a significant extent, we are dealing with the complex phenomenon of ‘culture’. Following Geertz (1973, p. 5), culture can be defined as ‘the webs of significance’ that humans ‘spin’ as a way of bestowing meaning on life. More simply, it refers to the collection of symbols, values, ideas and beliefs that help us to make sense of our world, as well as our place within it.

When addressing the cultural dimension of communion, the work of Benedict Anderson (1991) is instructive and can be usefully combined with the sociological literature on community. As Nadel (1998, p. 63) demonstrates, Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ offers valuable insights into the character of communities of all sizes, despite the fact that it was originally devised to explain the emergence and growth of nationalism. At the outset, Anderson (1991, p. 4) notes that communities should be treated as cultural artefacts, and understood within an historical context. In terms of the definition of ‘culture’ provided above, this means that communities need to be viewed as symbolic constructions that are actively pieced together by their constituent members. This process involves the construction of a meaningful narrative that bestows a sense of identity on *both* the community as a whole and the individuals who comprise it (Anderson, 1991, pp. 204-5). The crux of Anderson’s argument is that this narrative does not emerge spontaneously or organically out of the life of the group, but rather it needs to be ‘imagined’.

For Anderson then, a community exists in the minds of its members, and therefore represents a cognitive and subjective phenomenon, rather than a physical structure or an aspect of ‘objective reality’. In criticising Gellner, however, Anderson (1991, p. 6) makes it clear that this ‘imagined’ quality does not render a community false or illusory. Instead, he argues that the question of

the ‘genuineness’ or otherwise of a community is a distraction and that the more telling issue surrounds the manner or ‘style’ in which it is imagined. This style must enable individuals to cope with the fact that the communities to which they belong are, more often than not, too large for them to personally know all of the other members. An even greater test emerges in the fact that most communities are internally divided according to factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, and age. One way in which these challenges to communion may be ‘imagined away’ is through the construction of ‘the other’ – that is, a rival group or groups that serve to bind a community in opposition to a perceived common threat (Anderson, 1991, p. 7).

Given the size and heterogeneity of many communities, it is clear that communion is not necessarily dependent upon face-to-face interaction, or even upon the sharing of a common locale (Anderson, 1991, p. 188; Thompson, 1995, p. 87). Thus, while virtually all communities are imagined, it is important to be sensitive to the fact that some communities are more imagined than others. It is in this context that the importance of the mass media asserts itself. As Anderson (1991) notes, the media are important in providing a stock of cultural symbols that can fuel such imaginings, such that it is not only the *style* of imagining that is significant, but also the *means* through which such imaginings take place. This valuable insight is developed in great depth by John Thompson in his stimulating book *The Media and Modernity* (1995). Thompson’s central argument is that the media have fundamentally transformed the way that people experience and make sense of the world. This transformation impacts upon our personal and social identities, as ‘we [increasingly] feel ourselves to belong to groups and communities which are constituted in part through the media’ (Thompson, 1995, p. 35). For Thompson, this change in community formation and reproduction forms part of a broader process that he labels the ‘mediation’ of culture, whereby cultural symbols are increasingly produced and circulated via the mass media.

From mediated communion, we move to the fourth and final major conception of community in the sociological literature – *community as an ideology* (Lynn, 1994, pp. 312-13). Typically, this is the least developed conception in sociological accounts, and often is omitted altogether, or reduced to implicit status. This may in part be due to the complicated set of meanings and interpretations associated with the term ‘ideology’ that constitutes another of Williams’s ‘keywords’ (1983, pp. 154-7). Indeed, the range of meanings is so broad that Michelle Barrett (1991) has identified no fewer than six separate variants emanating from the writings of Karl Marx alone. Perhaps the most influential variant defines ideology as a false form of knowledge, or a distorted view of reality, which can be distinguished from science, understood as a ‘true’ form of knowledge (Barrett, 1991, p. 12). However, for present purposes, we will avoid this ‘pejorative’ definition and opt for a ‘neutral’ approach that understands

ideology as the distinctive, organised world view of a *given* social group, which is used to justify and advance that group's particular interests (Williams, 1983, pp. 156-7). It is in this latter capacity that we can borrow John Thompson's eloquent phrase and refer to ideology simply as 'meaning in the service of power' (1990, p. 7).

It should be clear that the idea of community is frequently used in an ideological capacity. meaning it is employed to advance the world view and interests of a particular social group. Indeed, according to Williams (1983, p. 76) the word 'community' is particularly well suited to ideological use, in that it stands alone as the only 'keyword' referring to social organisation that is *always* employed and understood in a positive manner. For this reason, community has often been used to move beyond describing how a society *is* organised, to imply something about how a society *ought* to be organised (Worsley, 1987).

The word 'community' has been used in an ideological capacity since the origins of modern societies, when it was frequently employed to critique the emerging urban and industrial world (Lee & Newby, 1983). Indeed, this critique of industrial society was formative in the establishment of the sociology of community itself, as it drove the work of its so-called 'founding father' – Ferdinand Tönnies (1857-1936). In his classic work on community, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, published in 1887, Tönnies provides a forceful statement of the conservative and Romantic reaction against the modernisation process. His argument is framed around a conceptual dichotomy, or what Robert Nisbet has referred to as a pair of 'linked antitheses', that Tönnies uses to gauge the quality of human relationships (Wild, 1981, p. 31). The term *Gemeinschaft* translates into English as 'community', and is used to refer to relationships that are intimate, enduring, and intrinsically meaningful. Somewhat nostalgically, Tönnies assumes such relationships to be characteristic of pre-industrial or traditional society. By contrast, through a hypercritical lens, he views modern or industrial society as being characterised by *Gesellschaft* relationships. *Gesellschaft* is usually translated as 'association' or 'society', and the term denotes relationships that are the opposite of *Gemeinschaft*: that is, impersonal, transient and pragmatic. For Tönnies, the transition from traditional society to modern society involves a destructive trend away from community (*Gemeinschaft*) and towards societal relationships (*Gesellschaft*), and its consequences can be grasped first and foremost as a 'loss of community' (Lee & Newby, 1983, pp. 43-5).

It is important to note that Tönnies ideological emphasis on the loss of community in the modern world is not merely of historical interest. Instead, its influence has echoed down the years, with the themes that found such forceful expression in his work continuing to pervade academic, popular, and political discussions over the alleged 'ills of contemporary society'. For instance, at the

1998 Australian Labor Party (ALP) Conference, a major talking point was the apparent 'loss of community' in Australian society. The outcome of this was the appointment of Cheryl Kernot as 'spokesperson on community matters', a role that will see her encouraging citizens to participate in volunteer work, supposedly as a means of 'regenerating community spirit'. Whilst these aims might seem innocent enough, it could be argued that unpaid labour in such areas as 'community health care' is a key means of reducing the financial demands on the welfare state, not to mention an effective way of hiding unemployment. In this context, Kernot's mission' might be construed as serving certain organised interests at the expense of others, albeit hidden under the 'warm and friendly' discourse of community. Of course, most of the participants at the ALP Conference were probably unaware of Tönnies's views on community. Nevertheless, their concern over similar matters – tinged by a pronounced sense of nostalgia – taps into a deep strand of thought in modern societies, a strand shaped to a significant extent by the work of Tönnies.

Following the methodology of Max Weber, the four major sociological conceptions of 'community' outlined above are best understood as 'ideal types'. For Weber, 'ideal types' constitute abstract conceptual categories that can be used by the researcher to measure and compare what is encountered in reality. Clearly, two or more of these conceptions may overlap in practice, and indeed this is often the case, especially where isolated rural communities are concerned. However, the question of overlap needs to be resolved empirically and should not be assumed prematurely on the basis of one's conceptual categories (Wild, 1981). Too often, writers conflate these conceptions, constructing their arguments *as if* locality, social system communion, and ideology necessarily overlap (Lee & Newby, 1983). This is often *not* the case, as is shown by the fact that many people reside in a specific area or locality, without feeling any associated emotional attachment, or sense of belonging (Lynn, 1994).

Although it is vital to carefully assess the degree of overlap between the different conceptions of community, this alone does not establish the *relative importance* of each at particular points in time, nor does it help us to grasp how this balance might have changed historically. It is here that the work of Raymond Williams can be usefully employed. In a thought-provoking reworking of the Marxist concept of hegemony, Williams (1977) points out that at a particular historical juncture, it is possible to clarify the balance of social forces at play by dividing them into three conceptual categories – dominant, emergent and residual. According to this schema, *dominant* social forces are those that are most powerful at a given point in time. By contrast, *emergent* social forces are of more recent origin and present a challenge to the dominant forces of the current period. Emergent social forces often become dominant forces in the future. Finally, *residual* social forces are those that were once dominant, but that have since been

eroded and superseded by other (emergent) social forces. Crucially, although residual social forces have been effectively formed in the past, they continue to exert an influence upon the shaping of the present.

The value of Williams's dominant-emergent-residual framework is that it relates the past, present and future in such a way as to highlight that dominant forces never exist in isolation. In other words, it sensitises us to historical change, by directing our attention towards the 'connections/disconnections between the past, present, and future that arise within the context of the present' (Ingham & Hardy, 1993, p. 1). In terms of the concept of 'community', this approach warns against a nostalgic and simplistic 'loss of community' perspective of social change. In its place, it offers a framework that emphasises the *coexistence* of competing conceptions of community and which directs our attention to analysing the changing balance of forces over time.

## Conclusion

As a 'keyword', the concept of 'community' is central to an understanding of society and to an appreciation of social change. As we have seen, however, grasping the meaning of this elusive term is fraught with difficulties, as it is defined and used in a variety of ways. Strictly speaking then, 'community' does not have a meaning, but rather a *range* of meanings and it is only by carefully unravelling these multiple and overlapping meanings that we can grasp the underlying issues at stake. This analysis has attempted this task, through a critical breakdown of the sociological literature on community into four main conceptions – community as locality, as social system, as communion, and as ideology. It has been shown that whilst these conceptions may overlap in practice, this is by no means logically necessary or inevitable and the degree of overlap must be empirically verified. What is more, when considering the issue of overlap, it is important to assess the *relative* importance of each form of community and to place this within a historical framework. It is here that Williams's categories of dominant, emergent, and residual social forces come into their own, as they allow for the coexistence of both multiplicity and dominance.

Of course, the purpose here has not been to understand the concept of community for its own sake, but rather as a means of clarifying the complex and changing relationship between AFL clubs and their communities. In the forthcoming second part of this article, the conceptual framework outlined above will be systematically applied to bring into sharp relief the post-war transformation of community in the AFL. It will be shown that there has been a general trend *away* from traditional notions of community as locality, social system and suburban communion *towards* a multi-suburban or metropolitan identity, coupled with an increasingly imagined and mediated form of communion that may have little to do with geographical area. Traditional notions of community have *nor* become

irrelevant, however. but rather constitute residual social forces that continue to exercise an influence on the present. Through an analysis of several relocation and merger disputes, it will be shown that these residual forces have on occasion been forged into powerful ideologies that have resisted the attempts by the AFL to fully restructure the competition. While the success of such 'community campaigns' hinges on specific circumstances, history and traditions of the club in question, even a 'victory' offers a temporary reprieve only. as the forces that produce such crises persist (cf. Nauright & Phillips, in press).

Part Two of this article concludes that in the post-war period the AFL has not witnessed a straightforward *loss* of community, as some supporters, academics and social commentators suggest, but rather a complex *change* in the ways that community is constructed and experienced. This, however, does not mean that critical judgments regarding the significance of these differences should be abandoned. rather that one should opt for a bland 'relativist' position. On the other hand, it *does* mean that such judgments need to be exercised carefully and must remain mindful of the (sometimes) subtle historical shifts that have taken place in the club-community nexus during the post-war period. Although Nadel discusses the nature and significance of these shifts in his 1998 article, it is not within the bounds of a sufficiently tight conceptual framework which hopefully has been provided here.

## NOTES:

1. Many of these accounts favour what Brian Stoddart (1986, 5-6) has referred to as the 'heroic view' of sport. That is, they focus on past glories, season-by-season statistics, 'bygone stars' and 'key clubmen'. In the process, the community involved in the club is often treated tangentially and superficially, or merely assumed. Whilst this is an acceptable – not to mention profitable – approach to sports writing, it fails to shed much light on the complex internal structures of football clubs, or the even more complicated relationships between clubs and their 'communities'.
2. The article by Chris McConville (1998) in the previous issue of this journal makes some interesting – if somewhat alarming – points regarding the influence of publishers over the content of club histories that are directed at a wide, lay readership.
3. The historical development of community sociology is summarised in a number of sources, including Bell and Newby (1971); Crow and Allan (1994); Lee and Newby (1983); Wild (1981); and Worsley (1987).
4. Although Wild (1981, 27) cites Williams and identifies 'community' as a 'keyword', he fails to indicate *precisely* what Williams means by this latter term. For those unfamiliar with Williams's work, Wild's account may read as though a 'keyword' is merely synonymous with an 'important word'. In fact, Williams means something more specific and more fundamental than this suggests.

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