

A Critical Review of Traditional Approaches to Urban Community Structure

—With Special Reference to ‘Natural Area’ and
‘Community of Limited Liability’—

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I. Introduction

From its inception as a discipline, sociology has been plagued by inconsistency and ambiguity in some basic terminologies. Indeed, some words which are used almost daily by sociologists take on so many shades of meaning that it is difficult to endow them with scientific precision. The word, community, definitely falls into this category.

It is generally known that the first sociological concern with community is Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Even though Tonnies was not interested in territorial community, it was important for the student of territorial community to have some understanding of the basic elements which comprise Tonnies' scheme. Since Tonnies, many students like W. H. Wilson, C. J. Galpin, L. Nelson have attempted in earnest to investigate territorial community from a sociological perspective. Their basic concern was with identifying and specifying the territorial boundary of a community at an empirical level rather than with defining the concept of community at a theoretical level. For example, Wilson (1912)

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described community in terms of a 'team haul' which lies within a given center, as well as which is a radius within which people buy and sell. Galpin (1915) described community in terms of the boundary of an actual entanglement of human life based on self-sufficiency of service functions such as school, bank, church, local newspaper, and so forth.

Since that time, many ideas have been expressed in sociology as to the conceptual definition of community. These have been done mostly by American rural and urban sociologists. Difficulties in defining the concept of community has been suggested by Hillery (1955). He has examined 94 conceptual definitions of community and concluded that: differences are greater than similarities in its conceptual components; if any, at least three major components can enter into sociological definition of community, including geographic area, social interaction, and common tie or ties. Similar to Hillery, Poplin (1972, 26-27) has suggested three conceptual components of community, including a territorial unit, a unit of social organization, and a psychocultural unit.

Another laborious task with which sociologists have been faced was to distinguish between different types of communities. Unfortunately this has been probably an impossible task. For one thing, there have been literally hundreds of variables which can be used to differentiate between types of communities. Furthermore, there has been no foolproof way to decide whether the variables are meaningful and important (Poplin 1972, 30). Nonetheless, sociology has generally distinguished communities into two types, the rural and the urban. It is, of course, true that even though the distinction between the two is commonly accepted, different students have employed different variables in the distinction. For example, Nelson (1955, 87) has used population size alone, while Redfield (1947) has used both population composition and cultural characteristics, using "folk vs. urban" instead of "rural vs. urban." In recent years, Poplin (1972, 30-40) has employed three variables: demographic, ecological, and sociocultural differences. Regardless of what variables to employ, the distinction between rural and urban community has been in general based on rural-urban dichotomy or rural-urban continuum.

Such a sociological concern with community began with rural community at its inception. However, the concern has been centered on urban community, as the whole society is gradually urbanized. Especially, the concern was focused on the inspection of urban community structure. As a result, urban community structure was initially understood as a series of 'natural areas' or 'natural communities', and then, taken as a 'community of limited liability'. Thus, the objectives of this paper is to explore the theoretical positions of these two approaches, and then, to examine their empirical validity for a more conceptual understanding of urban community structure, particularly in today's urban setting.

II. Theoretical Positions of the Traditional Approaches

In spite of so many debatable grounds, the term, community, has included those units of factories, trade unions, corporation, and profession, and at various times reference has been made to prison communities, military communities, religious communities, academic communities, and so on through a seemingly endless array of social phenomena (Poplin 1972, 3-4). At the same time, community has been used to refer to a moral or spiritual phenomenon against mass society. Following this point of view, community is characterized by identification of belongingness, moral unity as an oneness with other members, involvement in we-group, and wholeness (Poplin 1972, 5). Occasionally, community has been referred to a common residential area like neighbourhood. However, all have taken the locale component of community for granted (Bernard 1973, 8).

When an attention is focused on the type of community, the unit of territorial organization which, depending on its size, is called rural or urban community has been employed as a generic type. It is, of course, true that this classification is grossly oversimplified. Nonetheless, most urban sociologists have referred to town, city, or metropolitan as an urban community. Overall, their approaches to urban community structure can be classified into four paradigms (Bernard 1973, 8): ecological, class structural, power structural, and *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* paradigm. The perspectives of 'natural area' and 'community of limited liability' are basically belonged to ecological paradigm, as is discussed below.

1. Natural Area

Early human ecologists, who were represented by the so-called Chicago School in the 1920s, have worked on the assumption that the growth and resulting layout of city, its population, and its institutions follow regular and recurrent patterns. Hence, it has become their task to discover the basic patterns of city growth and to explain why cities tend to take on characteristic spatial configurations. In order to explain this, their attention was focused on ecological structure and ecological processes (Hunter 1974, 19-22). They maintained that ecological structure is the resulting spatial configuration of a city through the operations of ecological processes between ecological units. The ecological units they suggested are human beings and institutions (McKenzie 1925), single living organism, group, and specialized function (Quin 1950, 280), or individuals as aggregate and communal unit (Hawley 1950,

206-216). The concepts employed as ecological processes are competition, concentration, centralization, decentralization, dominance, segregation, invasion, succession, etc., while the concepts employed as ecological structure are natural area and ecosystem. Therefore, the approach to urban community from the concept of natural area can be said as a conceptual tool applicable to the analysis of urban ecological structure.

The term, natural area, has originated in geography. From a geographic point of view, it refers to the smallest meaningful territorial unit found within a city (Poplin 1972, 85). Because of the features of landscape (e. g. rivers, hills, and so on) and such man-made barriers as railroads, highways, and parks, city becomes divided into a number of small, semi-isolated areas. This simple illustration also suggests why the resulting areas are said to be natural, that is, they are unplanned, natural product of city's growth. Since the concept of natural area was introduced by early human ecologists into sociological analysis of urban community structure, of more importance was the fact that each natural area tends to become segregated in terms of the type of people and institutions found within its boundaries. In short, natural area was understood, at minor, as a small homogeneous unit within a heterogeneous urban milieu, and at largest, as a geographically segregated local urban community distinct from one another. Furthermore, according to early human ecologists' point of view, because of internal homogeneous character of each natural area, these small units of urban spatial organization tend to become culturally distinct from one another. For example, Park (1929) has argued that every natural area has or tends to have its own peculiar traditions, customs, conventions, standards of decency and propriety, and, if not a language of its own, at least a universe of discourse, which is appreciably different for each local community. Burgess (1964) has defined natural area as a territorial unit whose distinctive characteristics—physical, economic, and cultural—are the result of the unplanned operation of ecological and social processes. McKenzie (1925) has defined natural area in terms of the characteristics of its population, stressing such features as race, language, income, and occupation.

Such a concept of natural area as the substantive entity of urban community structure has been continuously accepted until the 1950s. For example, Quinn (1950, 267) has argued that natural area as a concept of ecological structure of community does not apply either to formal statistical area or to administrative districts, but to a single-factor area without much conscious planning or control. Hawley (1950, 81) was also in the same position as Quinn, viewing that natural area as a unit part of the physical structure of city is the simplest conception of the territorial unit of community, as well as is an area of uniform physical type bounded by physical features. Such a natural area provided an analytical base for empirical studies on urban community structure. Studies of particular types of natural area, such as the

Ghetto (Wirth 1928) and 'the Gold Coast and the Slum' (Zorbaugh 1929), are complemented by studies of individual and groups who are believed to be the characteristic residents of certain specified types of natural area, for example the hobo (Anderson 1923) and the gang (Thrasher 1927), and by analysis of the distribution of various forms of deviant behaviour considered against the natural area framework, such as suicide (Cavan 1928), juvenile delinquency (Shaw & McKay 1942), and psychiatric disorders (Fairs & Dunham 1939). They showed that different natural areas become characterized by high or low crime rate, by varying degrees of family disorganization, or by different types of mental illness.

In sum, natural area was seen as a spatially segregated small unit of homogeneity produced through the operations of ecological processes between ecological units in a city without a much conscious planning or control. Such a natural area was seen to be followed by urban land-use pattern (Hunter 1974, 20), and then was expanded even to the concept of neighbourhood in the light of residential homogeneity (Abrahamson 1980, 148). Therefore, natural area was a sub-urban community, and in consequence was treated as the most important conceptual unit for the analysis of urban structure or growth.

2. Community of Limited Liability

Some urban sociologists have argued that as a result of increasing urban differentiation local urban communities are losing their significance. Such a 'community-lost' argument asserts the absence of local solidarities between neighbourhoods as natural areas in urban setting (e. g. Wellman & Leighton 1979). Some have even argued dropping the concept of natural area or neighbourhood from the conceptual component of urban community structure (e.g. Dewey 1957). Others feel it should be retained in a modified form. The modified form is Janowitz's (1967) 'community of limited liability', Riemer's (1950) 'roving neighbourhoods', or Suttles' (1972, 21) 'defended neighbourhood'. These modified conceptions come closer to explaining the meanings of community at a local level and the structure of local urban community in today's urban context.

The basic perspective of 'community of limited liability' holds that local orientation and participation are still found in modern urban setting, but they are somewhat attenuated and variable and are generally less binding than they once were. In other words, local urban community structure is becoming more formally organized in the direction of one persistent form of local social structure that relates directly to retail function and yet provides a communication mechanism for social and cultural integration of local areas (Hunter 1974, 8). Similarly, studies by Zimmer and Hawley (1959) and Axelrod (1957) pointed to the

persistence of informal social circles of participation at local level in addition to participation in more highly organized voluntary organization.

In addition, the concept of 'community of limited liability' emphasizes the intentional, voluntary, and especially the partial and differentiated involvement of residents in their local community. On the one hand, it points to the importance of local voluntary association as a response to issues broader than those particular to an isolated community area. On the other hand, it provides a way of understanding the partial or incomplete involvement of people in their residential area (Suttles 1972, 47-48).

Thus, it may be said that 'community of limited liability' is a sort of floor-level reconstruction in the direction of voluntaristic participation in various levels of social solidarity in urban community. As well, the concept is based on an assumption that local community needs the allegiance or recognition of all or most of its members to continue as an influential social unit. The concept is partially responsible for drawing attention to the specialized role of community and the limited number of people who act as its custodian (Suttles 1972, 9). The concept also consists of an official identity and boundaries which are incorporated into the areal models of private and public organizations (Suttles 1972, 59), and the elements included in it are voluntarism, responsiveness to the wider community, and degree of self-conscious purpose (Suttles 1972, 187). Hence, it can be said that 'community of limited liability' is a structural approach to urban community in that it attempts to identify the boundary of human interaction network beyond neighbourhood. The difference between 'natural area' and 'community of limited liability', if anything, would be that the former is a view emphasizing physically configured boundary, while the latter is a view emphasizing voluntaristically participated boundary. 'Community of limited liability' can be, therefore, said as an ecological approach in that it is a construct imposed by external commercial and governmental interests, and in that it argues that community press as an external factor acts as a custodian in maintaining a community's sense of integration, its boundary, and its responsibility (Janowitz 1967).

Ⅲ. Empirical Validity of the Traditional Approaches

1. Natural Area

Criticisms not only question its validity as an explanatory tool but also raise questions about some of the empirical findings that natural area analysts reported. First of all, in regard to natural area as an explanatory tool, it can be indicated that the concept of natural

area has been put to many uses. As examined in the preceding section, even amongst early human ecologists there is an evidence of more than trivial disagreements concerning the referents of natural area. While Zorbaugh (1961) appears to view it as primarily a physical phenomenon, McKenzie (1925) defines it in terms of the characteristics of population, stressing such features as race, language, income, and occupation. Burgess (1964) recognizes three aspects of natural area: an ecological dimension which he includes both physical and economic characteristics, a cultural dimension which reflects the values of the population concerned, and a political dimension. For Park (1929), natural areas are identical with communities or ecological collectivities.

Second, in regard to the empirical finding, another group of urban sociologists has conducted empirical studies of the existence and meaning of natural area in terms of neighbourhood. Their empirical studies did not conform to this ill-conceived and loosely delineated concept. Furthermore, the introduction of the concept of 'neighbourhood' does little to clarify the situation. Although neighbourhood has been one of the most frequently used terms, this use has been at the cost of great confusion. To a large extent the concept shares with that of natural area having such a basic ambiguity as above in its physical and/or social referents. For example, from study in Seattle, Hatt (1946) argued that, rather than the city being composed of a number of homogeneous natural areas, which are 'real' and which act as coercive influences upon all who dwell in them, different sets of data—rental, ethnic, and social—produce different sets of areas whose boundaries are blurred and are usually overlapping. According to Wellman & Leighton (1979), neighbourhood relationship as a profile of natural area persists but only as specialized components of overall primary networks. Wellman (1979) reached a conclusion from his another empirical study in Toronto, Canada, that even if intimate networks between neighbourhoods are found to be prevalent, they are composed of both kin and nonkin, nonlocal, asymmetric, and of sparse density. Hunter (1975) also concluded from an empirical sample survey that although residents seek out consciously this area, they attempt consciously to create community in part through an active local community organization rather than through an informal neighbourhood. Thus, drawing upon K. Mannheim's concept, utopia and ideology, Hunter (1975) suggested that the area should be defined as a consciously created ideological one rather than as a natural area. In more recent years, Guest et al. (1982) also concluded from a sample survey in Seattle that even though neighbourhood identity may enjoy a continued structural grounding in selected parts of the metropolis, neighbourhood unit seems to be of special significance only within high status or more defended sections of the city. Lee et al. (1984) are also in the similar position in that natural community model should be modified. On the other hand, Firey

(1945) emphasized sentimental and symbolic connotations of area and place and illustrated the manner in which such factors could counteract the ecological sub-social forces which are based on competition and 'rational' allocation of land use. Recently Guest (1984) also indicates some serious problems inherent in the framework of natural area, including a poor definition of the concept, an exaggeration of the strength and complexity of social ties in local areas, and an inaccurate view of how land use changes in contemporary metropolis.

2. Community of Limited Liability

As mentioned earlier, 'community of limited liability' is a sort of floor-level reconstruction in the direction of voluntaristic participation in various levels of social solidarity in urban community. Therefore, its basic position is to identify urban community structure in terms of boundaries of residents' voluntaristic participation in the levels of social solidarity rather than in terms of physically configured boundaries.

Since the concept is so obviously a construct imposed by external commercial and governmental interests in such levels of social solidarity, it has been regarded by some students as an artifact. Because it does not subscribe to an indigeneous community structure, some students prefer to ignore this concept rather than the theory which can not account for it (Suttles 1972, 59). In another sense, although 'community of limited liability' is real enough and consists of an official identity and boundary which is incorporated into the areal models of private and public organization, as well as into an individuals' local orientation, their sense of community is likely to vary not only with particular statuses they occupy within both the local social structure and the wider society, but also with demographic and social characteristics of the community itself (Hunter 1974, 189). In other words, even though 'community of limited liability' is based on ascriptive ties and local community orientation still exists, commitment is partial and varied, depending on an individual's need and interests and the ability of the local community to satisfy these demands. Even if 'community of limited liability' is presently conceived of as an appropriate to the most rudimentary levels of community organization, the empirical finding of its boundary would be very difficult. The major reason for this would be that the residents' interests are only partially captured by narrowly localized community groups.

With rare exception, urban communities are divided into a mosaic of noncoincident subareas of limited liability and a range of organizations compete to construct an 'authoritative mapping' of the urban communities. Thus, people tends to relate to more than one 'community of limited liability' and to have many different adversaries or partners in

maintaining more than one identity (Suttles 1972, 59). This would mean that participation in the 'community of limited liability' is a voluntary choice among options rather than one prescribed on the basis of residence alone. In turn, action on behalf of the 'community of limited liability' becomes specialized and self-consciously oriented towards limited issues. Nevertheless, the concept does not intend to include such a multiplicity of formally designated areas into its original model.

IV. Conclusion and discussion

Thus far, this paper reviewed two traditional approaches to urban community, 'natural area' and 'community of limited liability', in terms of their theoretical positions and empirical validity in relation to today's urban setting. In conclusion, their basic frameworks are aimed at analyzing urban community structure, and their theoretical positions hold an ecological orientation in that they emphasize external conditions in the formation of boundaries of either 'natural area' or 'community of limited liability'. The basic difference between the two is that 'natural area' is a view emphasizing physical conditions, while 'community of limited liability' is a view emphasizing more formal conditions such as individual, commercial, governmental interests. However, in other sense, 'community of limited liability' may be evaluated as an organizational approach. Because its guiding proposition is that the bases of urban community structure previously considered 'natural', such as natural area, ethnicity and kinship have declined in significance, and the natural areas have been replaced by a proliferation of purposively organized voluntary associations which serve to integrate members into urban social organization.

However, it was identified from the review of some leading criticisms that 'natural area' is in conceptual ambiguity, as well as is in a difficult position in terms of empirical validity. On the other hand, for 'community of limited liability', although its concept is not debatable, its empirical validity was in a debatable position due to excluding a multiplicity of formally designated areas from its framework.

Then, why are these two traditional approaches faced with such problems? First of all, ecological paradigm is approaching a crisis in the second half of the twentieth century, because of not any intrinsic factors but, extrinsic ones. External social, economic, and intellectual forces had so modified urban conditions that they no longer parallel the paradigm of capitalism. Those conditions could, therefore, no longer support ecological mode. That is (Bernard 1973, 41), populations are larger and more heterogeneous; technologies

have made both transportation and the transmission of power more rapid; demands made on the space and water facilities of community have increased; and, the organizations of business units have become less centralized. Such changes have made both ecological processes and social interaction network differ today. Therefore, sociological study of urban community structure should be more than the analysis of 'natural area' or 'community of limited liability'. Its structure in industrialized society is not only diffuse but is multiple.

Urban community is a complex mosaic of zones and subareas, each of which represents a pocket into which the heterogeneous urban population is sorted and segregated. Due to the increasing scale of modern urban community, 'natural area' and 'community of limited liability' lose their positions as a framework of urban community structure. Granting that these two approaches are meaningful as a framework, they should be modified. As an alternative, symbolic-cultural and organizational approach may be considered (Hunter 1974, 10-11). The analysis of symbolically defined areas focuses upon two general elements, cognition and sentiment. The cognitive image of local community is measured by variation in residents' ability to name the area and give its boundaries and the size of the area defined. Sentiment is measured by variation in expression of attachment to local area and in evaluating it. In contrast, social organizational approach is based on explicitly organized local groups as the principle of urban social structure.

Another possible alternative is a social network approach (Wellman & Leighton 1979). This approach is essentially a perspective which focuses on structural relationships between individual and collectivities. Its salient characteristics are to give attention to: structured patterns of relationships and not aggregated characteristics of individual units, analyzed without references to their interrelationships; complex network structures and not just dyadic ties; the allocation of scarce resources through concrete systems of power, dependency, and coordination; questions of network boundaries, clusters and cross-linkage; structures of reciprocal relationships and not just simple hierarchies.

It should be, however, admitted that such alternatives may not also give a full-range of explanation of urban community structure. Their explanations are also inevitably limited to a peculiar aspect of urban community structure, as 'natural area' and 'community of limited liability' are so. In spite of continuous explorations of what the nature of urban community structure is, why are sociological perspectives limited to one aspect in their explanation? The answer to this question belongs to the field of philosophy of science. Broadly speaking, the reason may originate in the two facts. One is that human perception on the essence of existence is limited to his/her direct and indirect experience inclusive of value judgement. The other may be that social phenomena as the objects of study are continuously changed.

Therefore, new theoretical perspectives are being developed according to new experience in the changing reality. In a sense, the development of a new perspective may not be a development but a change in perspective from one to another aspect of reality. In this respect, the alternative approaches suggested above are also not developed perspectives but only changed ones in the way of attempting a more comprehensive explanation of the characteristic profiles of modern urban setting. Therefore, it may be difficult to synthesize all the perspectives into a framework, and may be useless to select one alternative. However, it is probably true that these processes of changes in perspective on urban setting are the processes of modification and improvement of urban social structural theory, examining the disagreements with other theories.

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<국문초록>

도시구조의 고전적 분석들에 대한 비판적 고찰
- ‘자연지역’과 ‘책임 한계지역’을 중심으로 -

鄭 大 然

도시구조에 대한 사회학적 관심은 1920년대 생태학적 분석을 시작으로 하여 계급구조, 권력구조 등 여러 방향으로 넓혀지고 있다. 때문에 생태학적 분석이 도시구조 분석의 고전적 틀로 불리운다. 생태학적 분석들은 도시의 성장과 그 결과는 규칙적이고 반복적인 유형을 따르고, 그 유형은 토지이용의 유형에 의해 구체화 된다는 전제에서 시작하여, 이 유형을 도시 생태구조로 정의한다. 그리하여, 초기 도시 생태학자들은 자연지역(natural area)을, 그리고 1950년대 도시사회학자들은 책임한계지역(communitiy of limited liability)을 도시 생태구조의 기본 단위 및 개념적 분석틀로 제시했다.

그러나 이 두가지 틀은 모두 개념적으로 애매할 뿐만 아니라 경험적 타당성에 있어서 회의적이다. 이 점은 이들의 의미와 존재를 검증하기 위한 여러 경험적 연구들에 의해 밝혀지고 있다. 따라서, 도시의 생태구조는 이 두가지 틀보다는 상징적-문화적(symbolic-cultural)틀, 조직적(organizational)틀, 혹은 상호관계의 망(network of relationship)의 틀로 분석하는 것이 더욱 설명력이 높을 것이다.