

Social identity in two rural communities - a prison or a path

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Abstract

In this presentation I will share the results of research into the social identity dynamics of two small anonymous Queensland rural communities. I will outline some found social phenomena and potential implications for rural communities.

The two anonymous research communities are located in SE Queensland, have town populations under 2000 and economically diverse bases. In 2019, they received newcomers for reasons relating to employment, lifestyle, family connection and property affordability. Eighty nine (89) interviews across the demographic were conducted and analysed in the two communities. While the communities do have some differences, the influence of an established dominant social set was common.

Introduction

This research uses a social identity approach to understand social phenomena occurring within these communities. Social identity research is social psychology that explains how social group membership influences human actions (Tajfel 1982). Social identity is how we present ourselves in different social settings. It is very fluid. Context matters, a lot. A person will present differently at the saleyards to how they present in church. We can be members of many unique social groups and some matter to us more than others. To belong, to be trusted, one must exhibit the group's unique social norms (Abrams and Hogg 2010).

For the social groups that matter to us; we modify aspects of ourselves to accommodate or integrate the group norms, to comply with expectations. People adjust the way they dress, speak, their values, views and behaviours to project a self that will fit in with the social practices and expectations of a relevant social group (Hornsey and Jetten 2003; Turner 1975, 1982; Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 1999). The benefits include positive esteem, social certainty, insider knowledge and privilege, contextual status and power (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000). Inclusion is dependent on compliance with the identity norms and narratives.

Marginal members may accommodate some social positions and practices to get along, to have good manners, be respectful, to stay socially safe. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." But we can't qualify for membership of all groups. Not everyone can qualify as a member of the Longreach Men's Shed or the Australian Medical Association or of your family. Further, one may technically be able to join the local Book Club but if one resists accepted socio-cultural habits either implicitly and in ignorance by, for example, not following unwritten rules or unwittingly representing a non-compliant difference, that is likely to affect trust and inclusion (Bowe et al. 2020). Or individuals may explicitly challenge the status quo by seeking to correct or improve some aspect of group practice, in good faith or not. It is not welcomed because they are not recognised as a legitimate member of the ingroup (Esposito et al. 2013; Hornsey and Imani 2004) and therefore represents identity threat. This was

evident in the two small communities. Any perception of identity threat (Reicher 2004) motivated action to address it.

In the researched rural communities, some established residents were highly invested in defending the local norms and narratives of community identity, conflated the community with their own collective identity (Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 1999; Scheepers and Ellemers 2005). Negative, competitive conflict arose when established ingroup representatives felt challenged by an individual or outgroup with illegitimate status (Branscombe et al. 1999; Ellemers *et al.* 2002; Jetten 2000). “Who do they think they are?” This motivated anti-social action on a sliding scale from a quiet word of advice through to violence (Wohl, Branscombe and Reysen 2010). Social aggression presented as pejorative labels, stereotyped criticism, blame or shame gossip, withheld support and targeted hostility to create obstructions, difficulty and penalties, a bad name aimed to exclude, diminish, dismiss, and punish.

Newcomers were often spoken of as not-legitimate residents, new businesses were not-local, youth or the marginalised were declared not-interested, some leaders were not-us and proposals were dismissed as impractical-here. Newcomers who became leaders (because a vacancy could not be filled) often experienced high levels of passive social resistance and/or personal attack and eventual burnout. Newcomer businesses ran into problems with community reputation, online criticism, maliciously reported for breach of by-laws or tax, withered for lack of local custom. They were subject to gossip about their personal life, their morality or the state of their shop or business. This all rested on lack of recognised social legitimacy as residents and community members (Patten, O’Meara and Dickson-Swift 2015; Woodhouse 2006).

Social sanction and censure were also used to target non-compliant established members of community ingroups, policed for challenge or breach of social norms and boundaries (Korostelina 2007). Great care was taken to avoid offence of those in the community regarded as socially influential and intolerant of breaches of local social expectations. This was a mechanism for retaining particular community qualities – people feared challenging unless they had social support.

In a small community, conflict cannot be compartmentalised to just one part of life so it is highly aversive. Avoiding community conflict was a prevalent reason given by residents new and established, in both communities, for non-participation in community groups and activities, as people sought to avoid contact with antagonists or association or recruitment to one side or another. It motivated factions as people sought to shore up social safety in numbers.

In summary, identity parameters can be a social prison, constraining unique expression of experience, ideas, skills, or personal qualities of the non-compliant by questioning their legitimacy and applying social sanctions. It risks impeding community resilience and capacity to embrace change. Newcomers can participate, as long as they understand they must stay in their box – they must accept lower status, less legitimacy, less recognition and they may not rock the boat.

So that outlines the prison of identity - what of the pathways that might be possible?

Results

There are individuals within the two research communities that make a significant difference to the sociocultural experience of newcomers. I will call them Bridgers. They actively help new people to find connections, solve problems locally, contribute to community wellbeing and they 'work' the social landscape to achieve social outcomes. One research community had many more of these bridging types than the other and that community had a higher measure of social capital.

The Bridgers were found as marginal members of a dominant social set, socially well established locally and easily accessible for a chat, who actively worked to connect newcomers and others into the community. They had personal standing and networks of support allowing them to contribute to community in discrete ways or in public projects. They may be outsider wives or returned adult children of dominant established families, or members of this group who have found themselves offside. They may be newcomers who have established personal standing and wide networks of sufficient social support to persist in the face of severe opposition. When successful, their public initiatives are adopted, owned and celebrated by the wider community as communal achievements.

Newcomers who found themselves helped and included within a strong positive social network quickly felt valued and became very loyal and accommodating of the town's unique culture. This was a quality of the community with the presence of Bridgers. Newcomers became more positive about the community and often actively engaged socially and in civic service. This was often discrete and under the radar, in private groups and private meeting spaces, unseen although there was some exception to this. Active welcome and integration into a social group with a unique identity, facilitated access and interface with social information about the community, made space for their voices. It provided acceptance, social connection and a pathway to creativity, experimentation, contribution and leadership.

The natural tendency of social groups is towards exclusion, protecting the boundaries and privileges of group identity. Effective influence to change group values towards inclusion did in this research, rely on an influential minority facilitating welcome and integration

Conclusion

This social identity research provides some ecological validity of social identity theory in rural communities. It gives a deeper insight into the motivations behind various somewhat antisocial behaviours including labelling and resisting inclusion of newcomers and the marginalised. Such social phenomena occur everywhere in all human groups – not just small rural communities (Hornsey 2008). But it is a relevant insight to those who wish to build positive sociocultural qualities of life for residents and may have implications for retaining population and building resilience in small communities. The elite tend to defend and enforce the community social qualities that sustain their dominance, and where those factors are threatened or eroded, intolerance becomes entrenched. Those sociocultural processes that foster division rather than welcome, facilitated integration and valued diversity within community risk making the community smaller. This erodes community cohesion and suppresses diversity, participation, access to available resources and capacity to embrace possibilities and change (Buikstra et al. 2010). Without awareness and a refreshed

focus on evolving an inclusive future identity, the established dominant social ingroups may weaken small communities.

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