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Social Identity as a Tool to Build Multi-Community Clusters

Betty Wells

ABSTRACT

To be successful, programs which promote multi-community clustering as a development option for small rural communities must combine both behavioral and structural elements. This paper focuses on the behavioral dimension by taking a distinctly social psychological view and demonstrating how social identity theory can be applied to promote intercommunity cooperation. Examples from a leadership program designed to facilitate the development of multi-community clusters show that social identity, so often considered a barrier to intercommunity cooperation, can also be used to foster cooperation.

The development prospects for many small agriculturally-dependent towns have dimmed in recent years, and appear unlikely to improve in the short term. The reasons, such as the long-term restructuring of agriculture, are now familiar, as are the results—ailing local economies, aging and dwindling populations, and eroding tax bases.

A combination of community development and regional development involving a group of local communities is receiving increasing attention as a way to counter these debilitating trends (Baker, 1989). This multi-community approach treats a cluster of towns, villages, and intervening countryside as a spatial unit, while giving proper attention to the uniqueness of each community (Hodge and Qadeer, 1983). “Grass roots regionalism” is a term which captures both the regional and voluntary flavor of such initiatives (Borich and Hammond, 1988).

While the need for communities to make better use of substate, state or national ties is increasingly recognized, the need for them to strengthen
connections with their neighbors receives much less attention. This paper focuses on how the development of new social identities can promote the development of voluntary intercommunity ties among geographic clusters of small communities.

**Developing Multi-Community Clusters**

In theory, the way intercommunity partnerships "work" is by expanding or making better use of the existing resource base. When territory expands, so does the potential for new social, economic and political power. If every social act is an exercise of power, every social relationship a power equation, and every social group an organization of power (Hawley, 1963), then new patterns of interaction can generate new social power. This power can be mobilized in response to a common threat (Hawley, 1986). A cluster of communities may exert itself politically or economically. It may act on behalf of its members to redress inequalities or influence social policies, or to obtain economies of scale otherwise not available. When like units pool their strengths, they raise their effectiveness beyond that of individuals acting alone (Hawley, 1986).

Spontaneous multi-community clustering appears to be increasing in frequency in Iowa, as are requests for assistance in establishing such linkages. Yet even with demand and receptivity, the knowledge and ability needed to cooperate may be lacking. Mitroff (1987:124) suggests that we lack the vocabulary for working together: "As a culture, we failed to develop as rich a language for discussing and promoting the social good and the social collective as we have for discussing and promoting individual rights and feelings." Baker (1986) includes lack of knowledge of how to cooperate in a list of barriers to inter-community relations. In a survey of rural local government officials in Iowa, Ryan (1986) found that not understanding how to work together was the single greatest barrier to cooperation between communities.

Guidelines are obviously needed. Unfortunately, our ability to provide the guidelines to facilitate multi-community linkages is limited because of the underdeveloped state of theory in intercommunity relations, as well as the neglect of horizontal linkages among communities in research and practice (Baker, 1986). An effort is made herein to begin to remedy this neglect by suggesting specific strategies for building social identity in multi-community clusters.

These ideas have grown from a leadership program called "Tomorrow's Leaders Today" conducted by Iowa's Cooperative Extension Service to help small economically distressed communities form partnerships with their neighbors. Two major objectives are: (1) to provide an educational program for emerging community leaders; and (2) to work with "clusters" of small communities within relatively small geographic areas. A cluster consists of two or more communities
represented by a small group of emerging leaders selected by leaders in each participating community. Several clusters go through the program each year.

Eight sets (or clusters) of communities have completed the year long program thus far—three during the first year of the program and five during the second year. Eight new clusters are beginning the third year of the program. With one exception, these communities are under 5,000; most are under 1,000 in population. Clusters have ranged in size from three to eight communities. The number of participants per cluster averages around twenty-five.

The program is resource intensive for both participants and staff. This level of programming would not have been possible without the support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The time commitments of participants and staff are considerable. Participants attend a minimum of ten sessions over a ten-month period. Most of our state and area community development staff are involved in the program, as well as county extension staff and paraprofessionals at the local level. The pronoun “we” will be used to refer to a rather substantial collectivity.

Our findings are being subjected to empirical test within an action-research framework. Consistent with most definitions of action-research, this framework includes a problem focus, a collaborative relationship between researcher and research subjects, and a linking of theory and practice in an action-research cycle (Winter, 1987; Peters and Robinson, 1984).

Multi-community clustering requires an intensive level of collaboration among and between participants and practitioners. Program expectations demand new patterns of interaction among participants, and a high tolerance for ambiguity. Similar demands are placed on professional staff in multi-community programming to cross disciplinary lines and county lines, and to cope with a sometimes uncomfortable level of “shooting from the hip” and “winging it.” The curriculum, in a seemingly continual state of flux, is only now after two years beginning to crystallize. The level of interdependence is such that we learn as much, or more, from participants as they do from us. We have had to answer many questions from participants with “I don’t know.”

A high degree of mutual learning and interdependence is inherent in action-research. The action-research cycle consists of conceptualization, action, reflection, and reconceptualization. This process may begin at any point and may draw freely from ongoing practice and data collection, previous research, and theory. Data collection and theory building are highly interconnected. Despite minimal theory in intercommunity relations, reviews of the literature on intergovernmental, intergroup, and interorganizational relations have yielded many useful insights. We also have borrowed freely from many theoretical perspectives: human ecology, network theory, resource
dependence, and social identity theory. All have proven useful; however, this presentation limits its focus to social identity theory.

**Social Identity in Multi-Community Clusters**

Understanding of the role of social or group identity in multi-community programming is limited. The threat of loss of identity is a well-documented inhibitor of interorganizational coordination (Halpert, 1982). Some research suggests that it is a barrier to intercommunity cooperation as well (Baker, 1989; Ryan, 1986). This is certainly the conventional wisdom. This article explores the ways in which social identity theory can be applied to overcome such barriers and, in fact, facilitate the development of multi-community clusters. In other words, the same process that differentiates social groups can integrate them as well. Social differentiation and integration are thus two sides of the same coin.

The social identity theory of groups is sometimes called self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987). Self-categorization analysis reconceptualizes the social group as a "collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category" (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). They share values, norms, and some emotional involvement with the group.

Social identity should not be confused with personal identity. Rather, the group embodies a shift in the level of abstraction at which the individual self operates, from personal to social identity (Turner, 1987).

The major premise of social identity theory is that people are motivated to maintain or achieve a positive identity. This premise is supported by evidence from a wide range of studies. Extended to the intergroup level, people are motivated to belong to positively evaluated groups with distinct identities (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

Social identity derives from a process of social categorization, and social comparison. Social categorization is a tool that allows people to mentally order their world and define their place in it. Membership is defined by one's subjective identification with a group, rather than by some objective membership criterion. That is, the individuals must define themselves and be defined by others as members.

Through social comparison, individuals assess the relative status of their own group, and the value that membership in that group confers. Social identity grows from the positive or negative value and emotional meaning attached to group membership. Group members will desire to achieve an identity for their group that is not only positive in comparison to, but also distinct from, other groups.

Social comparison may lead to social change only when alternatives are perceived (Taylor and Moghaddam, 1987). When a social group is compared to other groups, and judged inadequate, a number of action strategies might be
adopted. An individual member may choose to leave the devalued group or join another in order to improve social identity. A group may choose to be absorbed into the dominant group, or to directly compete with the dominant group.

Groups may also seek positive distinctiveness by redefining or altering the basis of comparison. There are at least three possibilities (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). First, a negatively evaluated characteristic of the group may be redefined into a positively evaluated one. Second, a new criterion for the comparison on which the group has a greater chance of being defined positively may be adopted. Third, a new comparison group may be selected as a frame of reference. None of these options need involve any change in the group's actual social position or access to resources.

The following section outlines the application of social identity theory to multi-community programming. The program is described in present tense because it is ongoing.

Application

When we began the program, we assumed that the two categories of group membership most relevant to multi-community programming would be community of residence and multi-community cluster. We made an effort to build cluster identity while protecting community identity. In this way of thinking, much as a secure sense of self contributes to effective partnerships between individuals, a secure sense of community identity will contribute to partnerships between communities. Our goal was to find ways for each community group to retain something of its own identity without adversely affecting the self respect of other groups (Brown, 1988). If groups can make distinctive contributions to joint ventures, then their identities are less likely to be threatened. Some of the tools we have used to build cluster identity include teamwork, intensive and frequent interaction, the setting of superordinate goals, and using names and other symbols.

Teamwork permeates the program. In the first three of the ten sessions, participants work in community teams (ranging from four to seven members). We use community teams not only to secure community identity, but also because we believe that small groups play an important mediating position between the interpersonal and the intercommunity relationship. Braeger and Sprecht (1973) note the role of primary groups in initiating community action. Participants are groups of emerging leaders identified by existing leaders to represent each participating community. This is important because utilizing group representatives is also one way to induce cooperation (Worchel, 1986).

A shared identity can also emerge from frequent contact and intensive interaction. The participants from each multi-community cluster meet formally at least ten times over ten months. Dinner is included in each session. Participants also interact between sessions. Frequent and intensive interaction begins to break down
interpersonal boundaries. It is evident that this is occurring when people begin to enter the room and interact without reference to community of origin. In seven of the eight clusters that have completed the program, this has occurred around the midpoint of the ten month program. In the eighth cluster, one community group was never fully integrated.

Contact may be more likely to “work” if group members are of relatively equal status (Brown, 1988). Status differentials between individuals in the program, all of whom are selected as “emerging” rather than “existing” leaders, have not been a problem. Status differences between communities seem most likely to be based on community size, and we continue to be concerned about a larger community dominating a group of smaller communities.

A superordinate goal is another way to build identity (Sherif, 1965). Goal related strategies not only minimize intergroup differences, but also build momentum and increase communication, trust, attraction, satisfaction, and coordination of effort. During the fourth session, each cluster selects two or three projects (goals) on which to work. The projects selected must meet a community need (as identified in a previous needs assessment assignment), benefit more than one community, be personally enjoyable, and be achievable within six months.

This short time frame, and the relatively modest accomplishments possible, are a deliberate choice based on several factors. Since we believe that leadership is learned by doing, we incorporate an action component that requires participants to apply, during the life of the program, the leadership skills they are acquiring. Small projects are especially essential for clusters because so much more groundwork must be done to get learners to the action stage than in a typical single community leadership program. That the projects selected in the first wave of the program were too ambitious has reinforced these beliefs. Research indicates that goal related strategies are more likely to induce cooperation when the cooperative endeavors are successful (Brown, 1988). “Small victories” have an advantage of creating momentum which may carry the clusters into the second year of the program.

A shared identity also can grow from the development of a common set of symbols. In urban communities, the manipulation of symbols of communities to redefine a situation is often observed (Hunter, 1974). Boundaries may be redrawn to exclude or include certain populations, or areas may be renamed.

The use of logos and names has facilitated identity development in these clusters. Although not required, most clusters have developed their own names and logos. Some of the names include Area Community Commonwealth, North Iowa Rural Area Development, South Story Community Consortium, and Upper Prairie Community Cluster.

Three of these strategies—teams, intensive interaction, and the cooperative pursuit of a common goal—are required for the participants to complete their first assignment which is to develop community slide shows. The community slide
shows serve several purposes. They acquaint participants from other communities with each other and with their newly expanded resource base. They allow the participants to apply interpersonal and group skills learned in earlier sessions.

The second assignment also requires teamwork, interaction, and the pursuit of a common goal. A team composed of members from each community must produce a cluster slide show. Here, more than with the first slide show, we see the creation of a new symbol system, and the emergence of a new identity. Later, when the cluster slide shows are presented to other community clusters at a statewide retreat, the identity is further cemented.

New Identities

When we began the program, we thought social identity would be most salient at the cluster level. As the program has advanced, we have seen additional social identities emerge. These new social categories are (1) residents of small towns, (2) cluster community, and (3) cluster communities. What these distinct social groupings have in common is that they are all new social identities for program participants.

Social identity theory can explain what is happening. Recall the three possibilities for changing the basis of comparison: changing a negatively evaluated characteristic of a group into a positive one; adopting a new criterion for comparison on which the group has a greater chance of being defined positively; and, selecting a new comparison group. In the first instance, smallness is revalued as an asset rather than a liability ("small is beautiful"). This message is reinforced visually with video tapes and slide shows focusing on the small town. A speaker from the National Association of Towns and Townships helps participants see that the numbers of people from small towns are not so small after all.

In the second case, "cluster community" is adopted as the criterion for comparison and evaluation. This forging of identity is seen most clearly when each cluster presents its cluster slide show to the participants from all the other clusters at the statewide retreat. We anticipated the emergence of this level of social identity.

In the third case, two new frames of reference for comparison are adopted: noncluster communities; and other cluster communities. This provides an alternative referent to the urban community. This level of identity emerged in the second year of the program. As the second year of the program neared its completion, a statewide informational meeting on clustering was held at a central location. The impetus for this meeting came from local communities and clusters, not from professional extension agents. Invitations were issued to all identifiable clusters, those operating independently as well as program participants, and the meeting was announced in statewide news releases.
Representatives selected at this meeting have continued to meet and develop plans to organize a state association of cluster communities. A system of signs has been proposed which would identify each community as a member of a particular cluster, as well as a cluster community.

In each of these instances, social identity is a tool which can facilitate multi-community programming at the community level, the multi-community (or cluster) level, and the multi-clusters (state network) level. The community development practitioner needs to be cognizant of this complexity. Leadership is a process exercised in groups, organizations, communities, and, as we hope to demonstrate, in clusters of communities. The practitioner must realize the limits of any single perspective in dealing with the complexity of multi-community programming with its multiple, and nested, units of analysis. However, the social identity of groups theory seems particularly useful because changes in the level of abstraction of self-categorization are inherent in it.

**Conclusion**

One of the advantages of social psychological orientations in general, and social identity theory in particular, is an emphasis on the individual and interpersonal interaction (Stoneall, 1983). Indeed, Hoggart and Buller (1987) suggest that the neglect of behavioral perspectives is a major weakness of spatial-structural strategies of development. For multi-community programs to succeed, and for the promise of regionalism to be realized, interpersonal ties must be cultivated and nurtured, and group identities developed. We believe that we are beginning to close what Hoggart and Buller (1987) have described as a yawning gap between behavioral and structural approaches to rural development.

The success of clustering will require more than resolving questions of identity. Patterns of interaction must become more regular, and integrative processes such as information and resource exchange, and pursuit of common objectives must continue (Wilkinson, 1970). To establish a more permanent unit, some differentiation of function is essential. Rules may need to be developed and administered. Realistic strategies for dealing with time and distance must be developed. Three of the eight multi-community clusters are formally organized, and several others are in the process of organizing. At the other end of the continuum, one cluster has disbanded and another is still searching for the "right" configuration of communities.

The success of a cluster will ultimately be judged on results. These results may be modest ones such as preserving the quality of life or even slowing economic decline. Conditions have so deteriorated in many areas that economic development seems unlikely (Braaten, 1988). In such areas, building leadership capacity and restructuring local institutions are alternative development options (Luke et al., 1988).
Simply put, rural communities with limited resources may have to choose appropriate development strategies. We believe that multi-community development is a neglected alternative deserving careful scrutiny and which, in fact, is receiving increasing attention from rural development policymakers. In a recent book from the National Governor’s Association, John, Batie, and Norris (1988) speak of the importance of documenting and evaluating what is happening in rural states with respect to sub-state initiatives. A step toward that has been taken by outlining how social identity theory can promote intercommunity cooperation. The careful monitoring of programs is essential to learn more effective ways of facilitating multi-community development programs and to begin to build a body of theory on intercommunity relations.

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