

On Pluralism within Community

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Abstract

Although it is most usual to study the shared characteristics of community members, in this paper we instead emphasize the pluralism within a community. The framework within which we will proceed is Explorationism, a perspective that all our knowledge is (so far) less than certain, that all our knowledge is indeed (so far) only partial and only tentative. This perspective will help us better elucidate how pluralism in every community contributes to the community's vitality and success.

1. Introduction

Although there are many aspects of the social phenomenon of community, the shared characteristics of the community members are often what is emphasized and analyzed. However, in this paper, we will focus on the differences among community members, specifically the pluralism within the community. Indeed, we will attempt to point out how such pluralism contributes to the community's vitality.

Prefatorily, let us note that we are considering the entire mosaic of "levels" of community: the home, workplace, neighborhood, village,

city, country, planet, Scout Troop, dance group, professional organizations of colleagues, civic organizations, and so on. Each member of every one of these communities brings their unique personal history of experiences to the community, as well as the attitudes and preferences that flow directly from this history into the formation of each member's unique 'in each present moment' personhood.

With this phenomenon in mind, let me briefly assert writer's prerogative and use the first person to describe one of my favorite personhoods. He is the person I immediately think of, in my own life experience, who best

understood, respected, and personified the power of community and its internal diversity / pluralism, in both his daily caring and his prolific writings about

- The ‘local wisdom’ of every community,
- The rich diversity within every community,
- The shared characteristics within every community, and
- The importance of every community’s striving toward its shared goals, which directly flow from the ‘local wisdom’, pluralism, and shared characteristics of the community.

He is Chaedar Alwasilah, an Indiana University educated professor at UPI (Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia), and he made important contributions to our understanding of the nature and importance of community. His teaching, mentorship, and prolific writings have had a lasting impact. This essay is dedicated to his memory and the invaluable work he accomplished.

EXPLORATIONISM

“Theories are nets cast to catch what we call ‘the world’: to rationalize, to explain, and to master it. We endeavor to make the mesh ever finer and finer.”

Karl Popper, THE LOGIC OF SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY, p. 59

This paper falls within the area of Education called Applied Epistemology, specifically the application of theories about what we know and the degrees to which we know it, as applied to socio-cultural aspects of community. The perspective of Explorationism (Faust, 1998), upon which this paper is based, asserts that all of our knowledge is (so far) less than certain – that all of our knowledge is (so far) only partial and only tentative. As the scientist and social philosopher Ernst Mach (1890, p. 49) wrote,

“Colors, sounds, temperatures, ..., and so forth are connected to one another in manifold ways, and with them are associated dispositions of mind, feelings, and volitions. Out of this fabric, that which is relatively more fixed ... stands prominently forth, engraves itself on the memory, and expresses itself in language. Relatively greater permanency is exhibited ... by certain complexes ... which therefore receive names, and are called bodies. Absolutely permanent such complexes are not.”

It is interesting (and fun !) to make two observations. First, Explorationism is offered only as a perspective. For example, it is *not* provided here as a theory that the reader is being asked to ‘buy into’ or ‘believe to be true’. It is simply a perspective, an *angle* from which to view the pluralistic nature of communities that we briefly examine here. As Mach (1890, p. 68) wrote, “No point of view has an absolute *permanent* validity”. Second, since Explorationism asserts all of our knowledge is (so far) less than

certain, and Explorationism is itself an instance of knowledge, we immediately infer that Explorationism asserts that Explorationism itself is uncertain!

Operating within this perspective of Explorationism, the differences between community members are made more explicit by emphasizing the varying degrees of certainty in the knowledge of community members. By recognizing different degrees of certainty (and uncertainty) in this knowledge, we can better unify that knowledge and move on to more robust community goals and more efficacious efforts toward implementing those goals.

2. Representing and Processing Our Differences

We will address here the problem of efficaciously representing and processing our differences. As described above, we don’t want these differences to hinder the positive actions of our communities. Instead,

we want these differences to contribute to those positive actions.

When discussing differences within any community, the first thing one might notice is that the absolutist language of TRUE/FALSE, rooted in the 2,000 year tradition of Aristotelian Logic (Classical Logic), is indeed the language we most commonly use. However, it is our (Explorationist) view here that this absolutist language is far too limiting and meager in its representational power to capture the numerous and ubiquitous nuances of the levels of certainty (and uncertainty) that individual members hold, in their different perspectives, within each community. Hence, what is needed to represent our differences better and process them more effectively is a language, a logic, if you will, that allows for a more nuanced representation and processing of our diverse perspectives. Let us turn briefly to one such language (Faust, 2000, 2002, 2007).

In such a language, we might assert that we are, for example, 'quite uncertain', 'somewhat certain', or 'quite certain'. But rather than these nebulous certainty levels, let us here consider instead a more nuanced language with a set of increasing certainty levels

.1, .2, .3, .4, .5, .6, .7, .8, .9, 1

where 1 denotes the level of absolute certainty (which is, of course, impossible from an Explorationist perspective). Further, concerning each of these levels of certainty, one can assert a level of either (or both) confirmatory certainty or refutatory certainty.

For example, the following four cohorts might reflect a community's views regarding a particular action the community is considering. One cohort of the community might assert a .3 level of certainty confirming that the action should be taken. A second cohort might assert a .7 level of certainty refuting that the action should be taken. A third cohort might

assert only a .1 level of certainty refuting that the action should be taken. And, a fourth cohort might assert a .9 level of certainty confirming that the action should be taken, while simultaneously asserting a .2 level of certainty refuting that the action should be taken. This more nuanced 'knowledge frame', about the views of community members, may well provide for a substantially superior discussion and decision-making process.

Instead of individual members or cohorts asserting absolute views, their views are now more nuanced, and these nuanced views are more amenable to clarifying discussions. These discussions lead the community to agreed-upon compromises, which in turn lead to fully supported decisions, and finally to fully supported actions that better reflect the community's goals.

Of course, I am not recommending here that we switch to such a

'quantified discourse' language in our everyday conversations! Bertrand Russell, the famous mathematician, logician, philosopher, and writer on many social issues (indeed, a recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature), invented a relatively complete symbolic language, but commented as follows, with his always present and delightful sense of humor, in his seminal paper "Vagueness" (Russell, 1923):

"I invented a special language to avoid vagueness, but unfortunately, it is unsuited for public occasions".

Instead, my hope in providing a quantitative example of the wide variety of differences among the members of our communities is that we can thereby all be more sensitive to these differences.

3. Conclusion

We all want to make our communities more successful. One way to do so is to optimize the utilization of the orientations, characteristics, and

'local wisdom' we share. However, another way to do so, as we have emphasized here, is to optimize the utilization of the differences the community embodies.

These differences, rather than limiting the community's success, can be a source of a wide variety of ideas and approaches to achieving our goals and increasing the community's success. For this to happen, I have argued, it is necessary (while certainly not sufficient) that community members recognize the importance of moving beyond the simplistic TRUE / FALSE codification of our knowledge dictated by 2,000 years of Aristotelian Logic. We must be willing to entertain the representation and processing of our knowledge with more nuanced linguistic machinery that better represents and processes the levels of certainty that our evidence justifies. Therefore, by more effectively coding and combining the ideas of all community members, the

community's shared goals can be better achieved.

Let us conclude with an observation about the largest community to which we all belong, and the clear challenge it presents to us all. This observation is from an unpublished paper presented by the author at an education conference in Malaysia in 2007:

"In earlier eras, prior to the connectedness of the Global Village (our world) in which we are all now immersed, societal groups could harbor weakly evidenced, often conflicting, even quite irrational, belief systems and yet co-exist. However, that is no longer possible: in the Global Village of today, and for all our tomorrows it would seem, we are all hearing each other's narratives, and some are asserting that their views are Right and even that other views are Wrong, and some are even using violent language, or even violent actions, toward those whose views they believe to be Wrong."

In conclusion, rather than using the absolutist language of

TRUE / FALSE or RIGHT /
WRONG

when hearing each other's narratives, let us all work together, in all our communities, to use nuanced language that acknowledges the pluralism within each of our communities and contributes positively to the achievement of our community goals.

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