

# The Sociology of Community Connections

# **The Sociology of Community Connections**

**John G. Bruhn**

*New Mexico State University  
Las Cruces, New Mexico*

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*To my Nebraska hometown, Norfolk,  
where I experienced the love of community*

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# Preface

People seem to have less time for one another and the nature of the time they do spend with others is changing. How and why we connect with people seems to be increasingly related to their usefulness in helping us to achieve individual goals and meet individual needs. While pursuing the credo of the survival of the fittest is not new, it has usually been balanced by a concern for the common good.

While there are many people who experience healthy, long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationships in our society, the values and ethics that sustain them lack the societal support evident in previous decades. In our society, indeed, in the world, there seem to be more broken and fragmented relationships than in the past, an absence of connections where they appear to be needed, an uncertainty and lack of trust in relationships we have sustained, and a tendency to select, restrict, and even plan, those connections which promote self-interest.

Depending upon their disciplinary vantage point, scholars differ in their attributions of causes for the changing and weakening of social connections in our country. These causes include technology, rapid social change, the ineffectiveness of social institutions in meeting new needs, greed and selfishness, greater ethnic diversity, the loss of community as a "place," generational differences, changing values, and fear. It is likely that all of these factors have contributed to the new ways in which we connect with each other.

Psychiatrist Anthony Storr (1988) pointed out that earlier generations would not have rated human relationships as highly as we do now. They were too preoccupied with merely staying alive and earning a living to have much time to devote to the subtleties of personal relations. Extending Storr's comments, Ernest Gellner (1996), a psychoanalyst, suggested that our present preoccupation with, and anxiety about, human relationships

has replaced former anxieties about the unpredictability and precariousness of the natural world. He argued that, in modern affluent societies, most of us are protected from disease, poverty, hunger, and natural catastrophes to an extent undreamed of in previous generations. But modern societies are unstable and lack flexible structures to respond to change. Increased mobility and social change have altered the institutions of family, religion, and education, which provided stability and guideposts in the past. Because we have more choice as to where we live, what groups we should join, and what we should make of our lives, our relations with other people are no longer defined by age-old rules and have, therefore, become matters of increasing concern and anxiety. As Gellner expressed it, "Our environment is now made up basically of relationships with others" (p. 34).

In recent years social scientists have attempted to understand what has happened to create the superficiality of connectedness we now observe and experience in our relationships with one another. A current concept used to interpret the changing character of American society is "social capital." Social capital refers to connections among individuals—their networks of connections that generate trust and reciprocity. A society that is characterized by dense networks of reciprocity and trust is more efficient and stable. As Putnam (2000) said, "Trust lubricates social life" (p. 21). Trust is a form of social capital. It is essential to the willingness to cooperate voluntarily and therefore encourages behaviors that facilitate productive social interaction (Tyler, 2001). Tyler suggests that the potential value of trust is that it encourages people to invest themselves in groups and institutions. To the extent to which people intertwine their identities with others social capital is created and facilitates the functioning of groups and institutions. Tyler warns that the basis of trust can change and the scope of trust can decrease in a society. When trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse (Bok, 1978).

Brehony (2003) describes how rapidly trust and a sense of community can change. According to surveys immediately after September 11, 2001, 60 percent of Americans attended some kind of memorial service and Bible sales rose by more than 27 percent. There was a new respect for firefighters, police, and the military, and people rediscovered family, friends, and neighbors. But a Gallup poll conducted on September 21–22, just a week and a half after the tragedy, showed that church and synagogue attendance rose by only six percent. Compared to poll results conducted immediately after the terrorist attacks, Americans six months later were doing less praying, crying, and flag waving. A September 14, 2001 poll showed that 77 percent of Americans said they were showing more affection for loved ones than usual. By March 2002, that number had dropped to 48 percent and

most of the people surveyed said they were back to life as usual (Brehony, 2003). There is no evidence that the tragedy of September 11 has had any impact on increasing attendance at religious services or on the importance of religion in the lives of Americans.

Americans have a tradition of rallying to help each other in times of crisis and then returning to life as usual. Life as usual seems to fit Messick and Kramer's (2001) description of "shallow trust," the type of trust associated with the interactions we have with strangers and acquaintances. Shallow trust evokes fast, mindless, shallow responses, like looking around before crossing a road or counting your change after a purchase. Messick and Kramer point out that shallow trust provides for shallow relationships, temporary groups and unstable organizations. Temporary systems of trust function as if trust were present without traditional sources of trust, such as shared experience, fulfilled promises, reciprocal disclosure, and familiarity being present. Trust has become quick, automatic, taken for granted, and shallow (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996).

As human beings we reach out to create systems of relationships. We form various kinds of communities that embrace our diversity and uniqueness as well as our membership. We need social connections in order to survive. We continuously seek out relationships and change them as we age and our needs change. As our collective needs change we modify our culture and its social institutions, which, in turn, shape our individual lives.

This is a book about how we interact and connect with each other as individuals and groups in a variety of social situations. We interact out of necessity; we connect as a consequence of choice. Our connections are what create community. Networks of communities that are interdependent, diverse, and responsive to change, yet cohesive, provide the infrastructure for a healthy society. In today's world our societal infrastructure is continuously being tested by forces and demands that attempt to alter it, and thereby to change the nature of how we connect within our various communities. We need to analyze these forces and demands and understand the impact they have on our connectedness so that individually and collectively we can create more social capital than we use.

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This book has evolved from the lectures and discussions in my class "The Sociology of Community" over the past four years. I am grateful for the constructive criticism from the many students who, through their questions, critiques of readings, topics chosen for term papers, personal experiences, and service learning projects have helped me in shaping a course, and a book, that incorporates theory, problem-solving, and application in useful ways.

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JOHN G. BRUHN



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There can be hope only for a society which acts as one big family, and not as many separate ones.

ANWAR SADAT