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We/Me-ness: Meanings of Community

Ann L. Cunliffe⁷

Prologue⁸

Community – just one word that is so important and yet we often struggle to achieve in social, organizational, political, and in academic life ... As Bauman (2001) pessimistically observed, community can be everywhere and nowhere, a dream and a reality – a warm place where others help us if we fall – but elusive in that it can be a paradise lost that we only hope to find. He argues that the price we pay for being part of a community is freedom and the ‘right to self-assertion’ (p.4).

Bauman’s words are reflected recently in our experience of the pandemic, which has brought out the best and the worst in us. People have come together to support others who are struggling with health issues, laid off work, evicted from their homes, and living below the poverty line. We have developed new ways of working, and while at our workplace or at home we may have glimpsed a more personal and familial side of our colleagues, laughing together and empathizing with unanticipated occurrences. Alternatively, there have been Zoom meetings that have turned into ‘absurdist dramas’⁹. Here in the USA, there are individuals who claim that their individual rights are paramount, i.e., the right not to have to stay at home, the right to refuse to wear a mask, to refuse to get vaccinated, and are very vocal in asserting and protesting their right – to the point of physical violence. Indeed, the drama of the commons (Dietz, et al., 2002) is playing out before our very eyes – in human as well as ecological terms:

Individual freedom communal responsibility
Ego humility
Self-interest community/ecological well-being
MeWe

This drama not only permeates society but also organizations, where employees are expected to be team players, but are evaluated individually, where decisions are based purely on the bottom line while claims are made about embracing sustainable strategies, and where sometimes a leader’s ego is more important than a concern for others. As in the case of Adam Neuman, co-

founder of *WeWorks* who resigned/was ousted after hubristic behavior including a nearly life-size portrait of himself surfing in his office. It’s a drama of the commons that also plays through our academic life as researchers and educators, one that has concerned me for a number of years. And it raises many questions about what community means and the ethical nature of community life.

Meanings of Community

Interest in the commons has grown recently, especially around the sharing economy and coworking, where independent workers, often with diverse interests come together in a space to share resources (Garrett, Spreitzer and Bacevice, 2017; Spinuzzi, Bodrožić, Scaratti and Ivaldi, 2019). For example, Waters-Lynch and Duff (2021) argue there are five principles in managing coworking as an effective commons: constructing a narrative of the commons, sharing communing practices, monitoring the commons health, acknowledging contributions to the commons and participating in decisions. But research has indicated that coworking does not always mean a sense of community, and that there is a difference between entrepreneurial-led and community-led coworking spaces. In the latter, decisions are made in a communal way based on collectivism rather than collaboration (Avdikos and Iliopoulou, 2019). It is these nuanced meanings of community that I would like to explore in this essay.

I am using ‘community’ instead of commons deliberately. ‘Commons’ has its roots in the overuse and management of common physical resources, sparked by Hardin’s (1968) article on the tragedy of the commons. In contemporary life we now have the digital commons and debates around voluntary participation, cooperative production, opensource software, and alternative forms of capitalism (e.g., Arvidsson, 2019; Fuchs, 2020), issues that members of the *Research Group on Collaborative Spaces* are addressing head-on and enacting in very practical ways. And it’s this practicality or lived experience that is critical. For many years I’ve been interested in the performativity of language, how our words do things we may not intend or

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⁸ I want to first thank the Board of the Journal of Open & Common Organizing for inviting me to contribute to this inaugural edition of the Journal. I am honored to be a part of the continuing adventure of the Research Group on Collaborative Spaces and your interest in openness, collaboration and reflexivity. And I ask for your patience in reading my essay because I (perhaps selfishly) took this as an opportunity to write about what is in my heart. So, this is not an ‘academic’ essay, nor a philosophical treatise, but more of a narrative essay – an interweaving of thoughts, interests, and literature that I hope will resonate and offer some provocations along the way.... I will explore the meanings of community initially through the work of John Shotter and Paul Ricoeur – and how, if we embrace the idea of community and intersubjectivity, this means recognizing our lives as ‘we/me-ness’. I then move on to consider the implications for research.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/05/handforth-insults-and-expletives-turn-parish-council-meeting-into-internet-sensation>

even notice, yet impact people in significant ways. For example, when we talk about ‘the’ commons and ‘the’ community – ‘the’ is important in that if we are not careful it objectivizes whatever comes after. Which leads to us to look at the object or phenomenon from the outside – as *something* to be studied. The same can happen when we put ‘ization’ at the end of a word ... because this shifts our attention to studying the organization or communalization as a process or by identifying characteristics, dynamics, mechanisms, etc., in abstracted terms rather than as living experience. Abstractions which, if we are not *care-ful* can absolve us from any sense of responsibility or accountability to others. While this way of theorizing has a place in academia, it should not marginalize ways of theorizing that are embedded and embodied in living experience.

I am using ‘community’ not to refer to an abstract social unit, but as our living social experience with others, involving relationships that Walther (1923) says encompass embodied feelings of togetherness and of shared experience – a feeling of *we* and *ours* (Ostler, 2020; Zahavi and Salice, 2016). While we may talk about community as shared meaning and shared experience, we might want to reflexively question to what degree we ‘share’? We might share a cake by cutting it in half and we can see the cake is shared equally. But how do I know that I share your meaning, see the situation is the same way that you do, feel the same way that you feel? Walther says we may empathetically understand another person’s experience through her/his words, bodily expressions and gestures – we may both cry about the situation, but it is not a shared experience in the sense of being exactly the same. So, a living sense of community means sharing while also respecting differences.

It is this living sense of community – of *we/me-ness* or the relationship between ourselves and others within community – that I would like to explore in my essay.

We/Me-ness

I begin with two quotes from the vast body of work of John Shotter and of Paul Ricoeur. I do so because they had a major impact on my life and my work as an academic and because, I suggest, they provide a start point for exploring *we/me-ness*.

“I shall take it that the basic practical moral problem in life is not what *to do* but [who] *to be...*” (Shotter, 1993: p.118, italics in original).

“The selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other” (1992: p.3)

These two sentences were my ‘Wow!’ or arresting moments (Greig et al., 2012) – arresting because they interrupted my taken for granted ways of thinking and acting – highlighting differences that made a difference by provoking me into rethinking who I am in a world with others, i.e., in communities. I first came across John’s *21 words that made a difference* (Cunliffe, 2016) back in 1993 when I began to realize I had been focusing on what to do in my own life as well as in my teaching. For many years I taught undergraduate and MBA business school students management techniques (what to do) aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness – without reflexively questioning their manipulative and exclusionary impact. And while Shotter’s words may at first appear to be individualistic, when read in the broader context of his work ‘who to be’ embraces a *we/me-ness* focusing on joint action (our entangled activities), relationally-responsive interaction and dialogue (in which we knowingly and/or intuitively coordinate our activities), and a social bond situated within a “common sense” or understanding. He makes this explicit in the following:

“What I do now depends on what we, overall, are doing... And what I do, is a ‘mixture’, so to speak - a complex mixture - of influences from within myself and from elsewhere. This is where all the strangeness begins.” (Shotter, 1996: p.3)

Strangeness indeed when we start to think about our *we/me* relationship with others ... ‘I am a daughter, a mother, a grandmother, a friend, an academic ... all imply *me* in relation with *we*. And where does the *we* and *me* start or end? Are they bounded or intertwined? I also want to note that since 1997, I have always inserted ‘[who]’ when John’s original sentence stated ‘what’. I will return to this later, but it’s an issue that brings me aptly to Ricoeur.

Ricoeur’s words also highlight the importance of ‘we’ rather than purely ‘me’, provoking us to think about our relationship with others and our identity. In *Oneself as Another* (1992) he explores the meaning of self-other – a hermeneutics of self in which I attest I am a character in a narrative, someone acting, suffering, and able to justify myself to others. Thus, otherness is not separate from self but is integral to, or at the heart of, the ontological constitution of self. The relationship between self-other is complex. I am unique in that I have my own life narrative in the sense of *who* I am (ipseity) and I am also the same as others in that I have an idem identity with generalized characteristics (physical, psychological, social), “the ‘what’ of the ‘who’” (p.122), which offers continuity over time, i.e., a dialectic of selfhood and sameness. Thus, we are not atomized individuals but always in-relation-with-others, in our thoughts, words, actions, and interactions whether we realize it or not. Ricoeur’s distinction and connection

between ipse-selfhood and idem-identity is an important one, because our way of ‘being-in-the-world’ involves a “detour by way of objectification [which] is the shortest path from the self to itself” (p.313). An objectification and abstraction that often occurs in mainstream Organization and Management Studies (OMS) research and education.

It also indicates why, since 1997, I’ve changed the ‘what’ to ‘[who]’ in Shotter’s quote – because language is important. John and I were good friends and discussed my change a number of times. In a co-authored chapter (2002) he agreed to change the ‘what’ to ‘what [kind of person]’, which still really didn’t address my concern that ‘what’ and even ‘what kind’ objectifies – but I think, over time, he was okay with my change¹⁰. ‘Who’ is ipseity – who I am as a person in my living experience with others – a critical issue when trying to understand community. I think in John’s last book he began to capture this, saying that in our theorizing we need to address ‘human-ways-of-being-human-in-a-human-world’ (2016, p.116). If we embrace this notion, then what does life, community, education and research look like? In relation to the latter, I suggest it embodies ‘who’ and *we/me-ness* that implicates a more phenomenological intersubjective orientation to our inquiry.

Together, Ricoeur and Shotter’s observations highlight the importance of understanding ontology and the impact of our ontological beliefs on what we say and do. Figuring out what we believe is the nature of social and organizational reality(ies) and what it means to be human in the world, is fundamental to who we are and what we do in our professional and personal lives. I now want to move on to address ontology, in particular how intersubjectivity relates to *being* in community and to how we see and enact ethics.

Intersubjectivity

At the risk of being criticized as oversimplifying (although I have worked for 20-odd years in the US, as well as in the UK and Brazil), much of US-oriented OMS is silent about ontology, underpinned by a taken-for-granted objectivism based on a cartesian dualism of mind/body, and a positivist-driven need to identify constructs, dynamics, measure variables, and to identify the ‘what’ of identity, or the ‘what’ of what goes on inside our heads. I suggest that even though relationality is studied, it is often a causal relationship between separate entities, classes, categories, or objects (Cunliffe, 2011). A subjectivist ontology also tends towards objectivation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and individualism in that as individuals we each have our own interpretation of what may be happening around us. We interview individuals,

code our data, or include excerpts from those interviews to illustrate common themes and perhaps different interpretations. As individuals, we may have common characteristics and interests (that we can identify and theorize in our academic studies) but this does not mean that we see ourselves as part of a community.

An intersubjective ontology is based on the belief that we are always in-relation-with-others: that our sense of who we are – and indeed of community – emerges continually in our relationships and interactions with others. Whether we are aware of it or not. Thus, “intersubjectivity is the *fabric* of our social *becoming*” (Crossley, 1996, p.173, my italics) and of our personal becoming. Crossley uses the term ‘fabric’ to highlight the intertwined nature of individual threads in our social life, that our intersubjective relationships hold us together and give us a sense of community. An intersubjective ontology means paying attention to how we share our world with others in a mutual relationship as embodied, interrelated beings, not as a transcendental ego. “This present, common to both of us, is the pure sphere of the ‘We.’ [...] the I appears only after the reflective turning” (Schutz, 1970, p.167). So, as both Schutz and Ricoeur observe, while we may be biographically unique, we are also selves-in-relation-with-others, “If another were not counting on me, would I be capable of keeping my word, of maintaining myself?” (Ricoeur, 1992, p.341).

In his study of collective intentionality, Zahavi (2021) explores the relationship between self and others and whether our sense of subjectivity, individuality or identity presupposes our sense of intersubjectivity, communality, or collective identity. It’s rather akin to the chicken and egg question Which came first? And if we ever get an answer will it be important? Perhaps what is more interesting to explore is if I begin to see myself intersubjectively as always in-relation-with-others, then what do I see, feel, do differently than if I see myself as paramount? And here we are back to the importance of language Do I see myself in relation *to* others (as separate entities?) or in relation *with* others (intersubjectively entwined)? Is community about feeling that I am an integral part of a we? Embedded and embodied with others? About shared interests, values, goals, heritage, experience?

Both Shotter and Ricoeur also highlight the ethical nature of intersubjectivity and by extension – I argue – the importance for community. Shotter’s work, specifically his words the “*basic practical moral problem in life*”, drew me into thinking about ethics – of what it

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLUUpbBDnmMs>

means to *be* an ethical person (i.e., who am I and how does that influence what I do?). Ricoeur is explicit about the ethical nature of the *we/me* relationship and the implications for community (who am I in relation with others?):

“Let us define ‘ethical intention’ as aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions”. (1992, p.172, *italics in original*).

This sentence raises a number of reflexive questions around: what our intentions might be (as researchers, managers, leaders, educators, community members); what is a ‘good life’; how might we enact ‘with and for others’; and what does a ‘just institution’ or community look like? Questions, it seems to me, that members of the *Research Group on Collaborative Spaces* are tackling head on. For Ricoeur, ethics are not just institutional they are also interpersonal and therefore intersubjective in the sense that they are about how we relate with and treat other people because we are responsible with, for and to others.

The intersubjective nature of *we/me-ness* in community also implies an ethics of care – caring for ourselves and for others in our everyday relationships (Gilligan, 1995). Not care of the self in Foucauldian terms, but as Noddings (1984, p.58) observes, an attentiveness to others in which “caring is a relationship that contains another, the cared-for, and we have already suggested that the one-caring and the cared-for are reciprocally dependent”. This is not a contractual reciprocity but a relational one – whether the relationship is a symmetrical one or not (e.g., Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019). For example, drawing upon Ricoeur’s work, Matthew Eriksen and I developed the notion of *relational integrity*, “the moral task of treating people as human beings” (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011, p.1438), of understanding and respecting our differences and how we are accountable to ourselves and to others for our actions. This was embodied in a comment by one of our interviewees, a Federal Security Director talking about his Assistant, “He’s a man with a heart” (p.1433). Relational integrity also means paying attention to our living conversations with others and how we create meaning *between us* in our dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986) – as researchers how we make meaning in makerspaces..... through #reflexivity #humanities #activism. I now go on to look at the implications of these ideas on community, intersubjectivity, and ethics for our research community.

We/Me-ness in Research

I am arguing that from an intersubjective perspective, we are not individuals, but are always in-relation-with others (specific people, ‘generalized others’, culture, language, etc.) and meanings are shaped between people in responsive conversations and interactions. As researchers

we therefore have a moral responsibility to recognize, respect and give voice to others. Consequently, intersubjective research is collaborative, participative, and pays attention to the nature of relationships and how we and others make our lives and work meaningful in dialogue and interactions. From an intersubjective perspective, classical forms of relationships or connectivity between researcher and subjects are not relevant because they suffer from “a certain excess of distance” (Faubian, 2009: p.149) in which the researcher is the acknowledged authority, the expert able to observe objectively. Critiques of the ethics of classical connectivity have long been rehearsed in anthropology and sociology (e.g., Clifford, 1983), yet are still mainly ‘under the radar’ in OMS.

Intersubjective research is, of necessity, embedded in place and space; collaborative because sensemaking, learning and knowing occur in meaningful dialogue between researcher and research participants; and reflexive in that all research participants examine the impact of their taken-for-granted assumptions and language on relationships and actions. For example, Linda Finlay (2006) talks of how researcher and participant relationships are a dance within a shared intersubjective space, where both together reflect upon their own and each other’s experience and embodied experiencing through reflexive empathy. In her collaborative research with members of a family business, Jenny Helin (2013) draws on Bakhtin’s (1986) work on dialogue to examine how we might sense and *listen in* to the polyphony of participant voices in our research – working with participants to understand and facilitate meaning-making in and across moments in a dwelling space. This involves an embodied sense of *we/me-ness* – a caring-for by a caring researcher. Enacting these values can foster creativity, collaboration, and vulnerability (RGCS White Paper, 2016).

Intersubjectivity is therefore not solely a communicative practice (which may be viewed instrumentally as a way of persuading others) but is fundamentally a way of being in our community and our world (i.e., a sense of ‘who’ *we/me* are and may be). The communities we are part of play a role in the way we understand and enact *we/me* both collectively and individually. This became very clear to me when I moved from California to New Mexico. While the USA is known for its focus on individualism, in New Mexico there are 23 unique Native American communities where relationships (between people, with history and tradition, with plants, animals, the land...) are an important part of life that are embedded in family, community, work and research. Jennifer Nez Denetdale talks about how, as an academic and a Diné woman, she ensures that her work is “connected to the needs of my

own Navajo Nation and our citizens” and that she has “a responsibility and an accountability to my nation and to my people” i.e., living life with and for others (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJVse-Kbu_M).

Collaborative and participative intersubjective research brings together researchers and participants to examine issues and act on them. Used across disciplines such as education, environmental sciences, community development, social sciences and health care, collaborative research connects people, participation and place and “recognize(s) the existence of a plurality of knowledges in a variety of institutions and locations” (Kendon, Pain and Kesby, 2007: p.9). It is a methodology that treats people as implicitly knowledgeable about their own practices, addresses issues of relevance to participants as well as researcher, and encourages diverse perspectives. Traditionally participative action research is construed as a cycle of research-action-reflection, and is open to a variety of methods including focus groups, interviews and visual methods – methods which I suggest often take an objectivist rather than intersubjective approach. I suggest intersubjective collaborative research:

- Doesn't just focus on the research topic, but what it means to be a research participant, with “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (Shotter, 2010: p.140).
- Places a dialogic emphasis on the role of living conversation in shaping meanings and identities unique to the context. This is based on the assumption that, “To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to hear, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his [sic] whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium” (Bakhtin, 1984: p.293).
- Utilizes critical and self-reflexivity in exploring taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings in relation to self, others, practices and policies.
- Focuses on surfacing participant insights around and above the research questions, discussing and examining similarities and differences that may emerge.
- Is abductive in exploring doubt, surprises, and generating alternative futures through insight and imagination (Locke, Golden-Biddle and Feldman, 2008).
- Means that research participants need to be attuned to each other and to moments of connection and difference in their conversations. To work within the

hyphen-spaces between us (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013).

From an intersubjective perspective, it is inconsistent to objectify data by coding or to develop abstract theories or models. Instead, an abductive analytic is appropriate: an iterative process of transposing observations, participants' accounts and experiences, and theory in relation to research questions (Peirce, 1906). The outcome of collaborative research is often insights that increase “the prudence or social eloquence of practitioners by enhancing their ability to discern and draw upon the resources of particular social settings” (Pearce and Pearce, 2000: p.420).

This sense of *we/me-ness* is embedded in the *Research Group on Collaborative Spaces*. You are embracing the notion of community and intersubjectivity through local, national and international meetings of people from many walks of life; by exploring new and collaborative forms of work, work spaces and makerspaces; and by collectively producing and sharing experience and knowledge. This not only draws on new ways of doing research, such as the *Open Walked Event-Based Experimentations*, but new ways of being a caring and care-ful researcher, and of creating and sharing knowledge. You are engaged in figuring out the ‘*basic practical moral problem in life*’ and what ‘*the good life with and for others*’ can and will be.

I am at the end of my career and find myself becoming more pessimistic about the increasing abstraction, sterility and self-referentiality of the Academy at-large. The *Research Group on Collaborative Spaces* and the *Journal of Open & Common Organizing* gives me hope for the future and makes me wish I was at the beginning of my career! I look forward to a fruitful future for the *Journal of Open & Common Organizing*.

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