Community, individuality and complexity: how superficiality, self-interest and cultural superiority contribute to the development of contemporary urban communities.

Stephen Glackin

BSc (Computer Science) MA (Cultural Studies)

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 2010
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Stephen Glackin
Abstract

In recent years there have been a number of social commentaries describing the fractured state of traditional social relations, such as community. Typically, these texts show how, based on the growth of globalisation and individualism, community relationships have eroded, leaving individuals without the support and cultural foundations necessary to develop a stable self image or consistent social environment.

This thesis will illustrate that, while these perspectives on the changing nature of society may be correct, they do not necessarily translate to the demise of community. Instead, what is occurring is a bias towards specific types of social activity, where only traditional modes of sociality are considered capable of generating communities.

Focusing on the concept of gemeinschaft, the thesis examines how romantic and simplified notions of what community should entail have generated a body of knowledge that has become blind to the many forms of community existing outside of this ideal.

By way of support, two ethnographies of contemporary communities (both creative urban groups) are presented to show how community is far from the permanent, singular, supportive and caring environment that is generally assumed.
Instead it is shown to be fractured, plural, often uncaring and highly individualised.

From here, the thesis illustrates how many of the factors that are traditionally outside of community discourse, namely superficiality, arrogance and imagined superiority, contribute towards the generation of community norms. These norms are shown to be highly individualised and plural but also cohesive, with individuals using the social identifiers of art and creativity to construct similarly and difference between themselves and others.

The thesis concludes by showing how community is constantly adapting to the changing norms of the social environment, as such, for social scientists to suggest community is dying, simply because its form is changing or that it is not adhering to traditional interpretations of it, is erroneous.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

One often speaks and thinks today as if individuals in contemporary societies were no longer bound to their groups as tightly as individuals were in former days, when they were bound to clans, tribes, castes or estates and were judged and treated accordingly. But the difference is at most a difference of degrees. (Elias and Scotson 1994: 103)

Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000) claimed that a decrease in civic engagement, as well as a reduction in formal social interaction, effectively destroyed the social fabric of America. In a similar vein, Zygmunt Bauman’s *Community* (2001) points to the vacuousness and irrelevance of contemporary community; suggesting that it is nothing more than an elected lifestyle choice, or community of taste. These are just two of the texts which broadly suggest that, due to the individualism (Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), detraditionalisation (Heelas, Lash et al. 1996), fast movement of capital (Lash and Urry 1987) and other intrinsically negative features of contemporary life (Lasch 1979; Friedman 1992; Sennett 1998; Hochschild 2003; Elliot and Lemert 2006; Sennett 2006), community, as a force for social cohesion, is either decaying or dead. The ramifications of this is that humans are isolated and without the guidance and care that they require. However, as the thesis will show, this is not necessarily the case. Rather than community being in decay, what has occurred is
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that romantic notions of what community *should* entail have negated many forms of community that are quite active and functional. This has effectively placed many forms of sociality, ones that do not adhere to the traditional perspectives, outside of community discourse. Resulting in large amount of sociality and de-facto community going unrecognised, which gives the *appearance* of the demise of community.

The thesis is concerned with challenging popular ideas about ‘community’. It provides a counterpoint to perspectives taken by some social scientists with an interest in how community operates. In particular it argues against dystopian perspectives that predict the demise of community, and mass sociality in general. And offers insights into the dynamic and prolific nature of urban community action.

The ‘thesis’ of the thesis then, is that communities do not always function as discrete and completely wholesome entities. In contemporary urban environments, communities are often inherently fractured, plural, highly individualised and superficial. However, this does not make them less of a resource, of less significance as a social form, or inherently ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than traditional forms of community. The forms of social bonds that occur in modern cities may be more be mobile, involve shifting social norms and demand superficial contact. However, this research demonstrates that modern individuals living in cities carry out their social lives in ways that are socially and culturally
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rich. Furthermore, rather than being an enemy of social bonding, superficial contact can help enhance the complex interconnections needed by people to operate in modern cities.

The research is important to highlight some significant deficiencies in the way community action is often viewed, and to show the diversity of activity that goes towards generating the sense of belonging, identity and similar cultural understanding of a community. The thesis represents an attempt to address inadequacies in thinking about ‘community, where the depth and complexity of contemporary social form across the cityscape is either ignored or treated as antithetical to social bonding. It demonstrates, in opposition to authors like Putnam, that the near infinite variety of parties, gigs, exhibitions and other socio-cultural activities occurring every night across the city, are a sign that ‘community’ is very much alive.

However, as it presents a very different picture of what comprises contemporary community structure, one that lies outside of traditional perspectives, it could be argued that the activities covered in the thesis are not indicative of community at all, and are more related to individualistic consumerist behaviour (exactly the point of many of the above theorists). So prior to continuing it is important to offer a clarification of what is meant by ‘community’, in the context of how it will be used in the remainder of the argument.
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Community, in its traditional form (described by Tonnies as gemeinschaft), is typified as localised, homogenous and historical determined, containing high levels of reciprocity and social capital. Individuals involved in the community are reasonably stationary, in that they have well-developed and long-term relationships with other community members. They are well known amongst each other, rely on local facilities, are actively involved in local activities and have a shared identity, cultural outlook and sense of belonging.

Modern forms of sociality have some similar features to what has often been called ‘gesellschaft’. It often involves people living with large numbers of others, are much more mobile, often making contact outside of familial relationships, enjoying multiple cultural influences, in competition and with much emphasis on individual autonomy. On the face of it, modern city living involves people living in sharp contrast to what many have considered to be traditional community. Indeed it is often assumed that modern forms of sociality lead to the breakdown of community.

However, this thesis does not accept the idea that classic ideas about ‘community’ are adequate for understanding the way social bonds are practiced. Nor does it accept the idea that modern forms of sociality are antithetical to ‘community’. Rather it starts from the premise that ‘community’, as a set of social practices, is just as active in modern social settings as it was in traditional life. This being the
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case, it is important to set out the features of the term ‘community’ adopted in the thesis.

As did many living in traditional settings, modern subjects share common cultural perspectives, common identities, interactions and reliance upon the locale. We can then say that the practice of community involves sharing certain kinds of values, identity and connection to space or place. However, these are often not as rigid, homogenous or as overarching as in traditional life. Due to the plurality of communities that can occupy an area of the city, as well as the ways in which individuals can be part of many different communities at different times, the boundaries between groups are often very blurred. There is also the highly individualised nature of contemporary communities, with individuals being far more reflexive in the development of their own personal networks, which generates, from one perspective, a very heterogeneous image of community. There are also different levels and types of intimacy, interaction and reciprocity.

So, far from there existing a singular, overarching experience of community, it can instead be imagined as a very fluid set of social relations and practices. In modern times this practice of sharing values, identities and locales relies much more on networks, fluid and mobile scenes, combinations of strategic individuals and organisations, and highly shifting and contingent social activities.
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Here ‘network’ can be taken to mean the interconnections between individuals or groups. It is purely social and carries with it little in the way of cultural weight or group commonality. A ‘scene’ is the cultural version of this, it is essentially the cultural and subcultural groups that operate in a locale; these change with the culture and typically operate out of a small number of venues. Community can be best defined as combination of these and other groups in a locale, or the resultant socio-cultural form that is generated out of repeated interaction, regardless of type of reciprocity, depth of intimacy, wholesomeness of activity or individuality of the members, across a number of networks and scenes (or whatever other name one wishes to give to the multitude of types in groupings occurring within the city) that generates a common cultural perspective amongst its members. It is a phenomenon that is localised, but not overarching or absolutely inclusive. It is the product of many smaller social or cultural groupings interacting, on some level, with each other, and produces individuals that have a reasonably common set of beliefs, worldviews or identities.

In this modern experience of community, relationships are more organic, fluid and dispersed. Weak social bonds are critical. Superficiality, individuality and apparently shallow contact exists to bring people together to experience ‘community’. In this way, far from being viewed as negative or antithetical to community, thin and weak social contact makes up a critical ingredient in the ‘cake’ that is modern community.
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What this thesis will show is that community is not in decay, but is actually quite vibrant, just not in the ‘traditional’ form, which provides the basis for the above authors’ theorising. Rather than it being wholesome, caring and unified, community will be shown to be fractured and highly individualised; in that individuals are far less defined by collective action and more by personally constructed networks. However, instead of this detracting from it or reducing its effectiveness, these factors will be presented as intrinsic aspects of contemporary community relations. In sum what this thesis will present is an alternative to both traditional perceptions of community and to the ‘death of community’ thesis. It will illustrate how community can be individualised, plural, self-absorbed, uncaring while simultaneously coherent, productive and a key contributor to the identity and the social integration of individuals.

As mentioned, of particular significance is Ferdinand Tonnies’ concept of Gemeinschaft (1963); a theoretical perspective of social structure that openly celebrated rural community over that of urban society. Though revised and openly criticised (Bell and Newby 1971; Delanty 2003), this concept continues to have considerable impact, not only regarding topics that concern community, but also upon many contemporary perspectives on society and culture. It is typical of a number of sociological positions that define community as simple, family based, residing in one locale and as being essentially healthy and supportive (Etzioni 1993; Harvey 2000; Hopper 2003). This is the ‘warm’ and ‘cosy’ perspective of community (Bauman 2001:1), and is the viewpoint that many studies use as their
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foundation for defining a community (Delanty 2003: 53). However, when gemeinschaft, or any other simplistic way of imagining society, is examined, as this thesis will do, it becomes apparent that it actually heavily based on nostalgic interpretations of the past, and as a corollary of this, also presumes a dystopian present and future. The effect of this is to produce a range of texts that follow a ‘Paradise Lost’ (Bauman 2001: 3) style of argument, where social and cultural systems are shown to be in decay based on the changing nature of society and the death of community. But, as mentioned, these are generally based on the presumption that the type of community represented by gemeinschaft actually existed, and that it is now gone, leaving us without the support mechanisms necessary for a wholesome existence.

What this thesis does is to sidestep gemeinschaft and examine communities from outside of this perspective, generating some novel ways to view the community process. By this it is hoped that the generally dystopian perspectives of contemporary social theorists can be tempered by showing how elements of social change have become incorporated into community models. Essentially this thesis will argue for the continued existence of community, but not in the gemeinschaft form. It incorporates a consideration of a number of themes which have been linked to social decay, namely individualism, superficiality and post-modern assumptions about cultural fracturing and shows how these have been incorporated into the community process.
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To aid in illustrating this, two examples of non-typical communities will be presented. Both are urban collectives of artists, students and subculturalists and they are partially atypical of communities in that they are non-traditional, diverse, plural, superficial and highly individualised. As such they do not represent the warm, caring and essentially wholesome interpretation of community that gemeinschaft would suggest. However, they have common cultural practices, use common public space and are well networked into dense, effective, though weakly linked, collectives. And while they generally do not provide support, in terms of close, personal assistance, they do provide support in the socialising and belonging that this generates. They also involve many common community practices, such as gossip, in-group and out-group construction and myths of superiority, all of which are characteristic of ‘normal’ community practice. As such, though atypical, they are still valid and functional examples of community.

However, as they are outwardly fractured, from one perspective these ‘communities’ could be seen as emblematic of the individuation, superficiality and popular culture obsessed individuals that are indicative of social malaise (Bauman 2000; Bauman 2001; Bauman 2001; Bauman 2002), but this is only when viewed from the position of gemeinschaft. From another position, one that does not begin by negating social relations that do not stand up to ‘traditional’ perspectives of community, they are actually indicative of how contemporary community actually functions in urban environments.
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Hence this thesis is putting forward a number of proposals. Firstly, that gemeinschaft, or ‘traditional’ modes of understanding community, are unhelpful, as they are simplistic and based largely on nostalgia and binary opposition. They do not allow for the plurality and polyphony that is evident in contemporary social environments and are far too focused on homogeneity to be effective. They also have a focus upon traditional or ‘healthy’ sociality, and generally automatically exclude activity that is oppositional to this understanding.

This examination of social phenomena that have traditionally been represented as ‘unpleasant’ will be the second theme of the thesis, and will be an illustration of how ignoring unpalatable or ‘unhealthy’ social practice ignores large areas of everyday life that are highly productive in constructing the social fabric of locales. Essentially this point will be arguing for the necessity of realistic social data over that of morally sanctioned, or ‘acceptable’ social data.

The final point will be a broad discussion on the nature of individualisation, social breakdown and community. This final point is one that, much like the two previous points, runs throughout the thesis and which is closely linked to the discussion on gemeinschaft. As with gemeinschaft, many contemporary observations on social life, such as individuation (Bellah, Madsen et al. 1985; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), narcissism (Lasch 1979), the demise of community (Putnam 2000; Hopper 2003) and the death of public space (Sennett 1974; Zukin 1992), will be shown to be quite polarised in their arguments and to
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be based on similar rhetorical positions. But instead of suggesting that these
observations are inaccurate the thesis will simply argue that they are not
indicative of social decay. Instead it will suggest that all of these themes run
concurrently within contemporary communities. So while some theorists, notably
Bauman, argue that the fluidity and individualism central to late-modern life is
producing fractured social identities, this thesis will argue that this fluidity and
individualism has been incorporated into the greater sociality of community
discourse, allowing for both individualism and community to exist
simultaneously. Furthermore, many of the aforementioned indicators of social
malaise will be shown to be quite active aspects in the construction and
maintenance of the studied communities.

In terms of positioning itself within the literature on this debate, given that much
of the research began from a subcultural perspective, there is a similarity to
Willis’ (1978) and Young’s (1971) work on youth subculture; as the research
involves ethnography and analysis of subaltern groups. However, given that the
theories of individualisation of Beck (2002) and Bauman (2001) was also highly
influential, the homology that existed in these earlier studies of youth
communities was replaced with the more post-structuralist, or culturally
omnivorous perspectives of Redhead (1990), Carrabine and Longhurst (1999) and
Malbon (1999). As with the texts from these authors, distinct subcultures were not
as evident as trends in consumer culture, but, and this is arguably one of the key
propositions of the thesis, these trends were not so transient or without meaning as
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to negate the formation of distinct urban communities. The many different communities, or rather the proto subcultural groups, that made up the sociality of city the (Fischer 1975), were united by meta-themes, not unlike Featherstone’s ‘aesthetisation of everyday life’ (1992). These groups used art, pan-subcultural identification and the construction of ‘alternative’ identities as a commonality that generated community out of disparate cultural groups. Essentially they were united by performing what Moore (1995) and Lloyd (2006) referred to as ‘the bohemian’, or the stereotype of the artist and fringe-dweller. But these communities were also highly individualised, and as such were more like the personal networks of Wellman (1988), and were discernable as communities only when they came together in communal spaces. In this regard the communities map more closely to Savage et al.’s position of ‘elective belonging’ and ‘partiality’ (Savage, Bagnall et al. 2005) than to classic, gemeinschaft understandings of community. So in terms of orientation, this thesis is positioned at an intersection between ethnographies of youth subculture (Willis, Redhead), late-modern sociological perspectives (Bauman, Sennett, Beck, Lash and Urry, Ritzer), urban social geography (Foote-White, Lloyd, Zukin) and literature focused on the community debate (Tonnies, Delanty, Savage). As such it utilises a broad perspective on some key contemporary social issues, and in doing so it attempts to bridge the gap between these typically segregated research fields to generate an almost interdisciplinary approach to understanding the workings of urban community.
Introduction

What has been covered so far are the key themes and theoretical perspective overview of the thesis. Though there are chapters that address some of the theoretical issues more than others, generally these are woven through the entire thesis. By way of providing a more comprehensive overview of the thesis, as well a more explicit overview of how the arguments are developed, what follows is a breakdown of the chapters and the key points within each.

Chapter 2 details the methodological approach used in the thesis. This chapter opens with an explanation of the approach to the theoretical aspect of the research, and goes on to elaborate upon why there is such a strong focus on late modern theorists. The later parts of this chapter concern the technical aspects of ethnography and as such will be of most interest to those who want to raise questions about the validity of the research. The final section explains how the methodology underpinning the ethnographic research came to be, and as such may inform the reader as to the direction and reasoning behind much of the fieldwork.

The third chapter begins the discussion on community. In this chapter, the concept of gemeinschaft is developed and its influence on contemporary perspectives on community discourse, as well as social theory in general, is analysed. Firstly, gemeinschaft is shown to be based on romanticised notions of rural life. Raymond Williams’ work is particularly significant here, as it shows how mythic notions of rurality and bygone eras has been a consistent theme in literature (1975). Using
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this, as well as other criticisms, notably Delanty (2003), the flaws in using
simplistic notions of community are revealed. This is followed by a number of
contemporary examples that show the continued influence of gemeinschaft.

The first of these is Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000), which is essentially
an argument on the demise of American community. Here the basis of Putnam’s
research is shown as being based on ‘typical’ community practices: practices that
are considered socially ‘healthy’ and associated with typical, middle class, 1960’s,
white American culture. The informal aspects of community, as well as
individually constructed schemas of socialising, new forms of entertainment and
subcultural aspect of sociality, are largely ignored, resulting in a text that suggests
community is dying based on reduction in very specific, and arguably outdated,
social institutions. The affect of gemeinschaft here is illustrated as limiting
research and bracketing only certain types of activity as valid community practice,
resulting in only ‘traditional’ types of community being represented. And the
result of this is, the collection of, and reliance upon, erroneous data on the failings
of community (Campbell 2001).

The other aspects of contemporary theory that are addressed are individualism
(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Elliot and Lemert 2006), narcissism (Lasch
1979), the speeding up of cultural cycles (Lash and Urry 1987; Redhead 1990;
Virilio 2005) and the death of public space (Sennett 1974; Zukin 1995). And
though each addresses different aspects of contemporary life, all are shown, at
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least in part, to be based on the assumptions of the loss of gemeinschaft community. Once again, it must be noted that the point here is not to show the invalidity of these theories, but merely to illustrate the continued significance of gemeinschaft as a construct and its effect on social theory. The conclusion of this chapter shows that, regardless of its effect, the concept of gemeinschaft is largely constructed out of a romanticised opposition to urban life and as such is not representative of actual community, but is more of an idealistic conception of communal life.

Given that the romanticised gemeinschaft community has been shown to be mythic, the next chapter, the fourth, examines some significant historical community studies to determine how urban community actually functions. This chapter uses some examples of ethnographies that have largely worked outside of the central assumptions of gemeinschaft. From these it attempts to extrapolate some of the key features of the community process. The examples include a 1940’s study of urban decay (Foote Whyte 1943), a study of transient drunks in America (Spradley 1970), a study of working class alienation (Willis 1977), research into school violence and community (Elias and Scotson 1994), and an examination of elective community in a contemporary urban environment (Savage, Bagnall et al. 2005). Aside from the final example, these examine outwardly negative factors of community, phenomenon that are typically associated with anti-community, but, as will be shown, these factors are actually powerful devices for the construction of community norms.
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This chapter shows how the concept of community is far from the safe, singular and a-priori place exemplified by traditional perspectives of it. Community is diverse and multiple, largely imagined, filled with conflict, highly individualised and largely labelled as a community from outside. As such, it could be argued that community, as we think we know it, does not actually exist. However, the interaction of the numerous networks and socio-cultural affiliations represented in these texts, builds into something that is greater than its parts and, as will be shown later, produces a cultural logic that is very specific to the particular social organisation that constructed it. This ‘cultural logic’ is largely imagined and need not make sense outside of the community, but at the same time is very real in effect and goes to produce the common culture and networks that essentially define community. This chapter is presented as part of the argument against traditional perspectives on community and as a partial legitimation of the researched groups, but it also introduces some of the key themes, or the aforementioned less ‘healthy’ social phenomena, that will be shown to aid in the construction of contemporary community.

Following this, in chapters five and six, are two ethnographies that represent the types of communities alluded to. The first, the Perth art community, is a loose collective of individuals associated with the art and music scenes in Perth, Western Australia. This group consists of students, musicians, subculturalists, artists and other individuals who engage in the social events and institutions that
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define the community. These spaces include exhibition openings, music performances, parties, a number of cafés and the institutional norm of shared accommodation. Within this community there is a general theme of creativity amongst participants, with the vast majority of respondents suggested that they were involved in some form of cultural production. However, as will be seen, actual production was not as significant as performing the role of ‘the bohemian’. Other features of this group were the high levels of individualisation, in terms of both personal network and identity. In terms of personal networks it appeared as though each individual had a discrete set of associations that was specific to their circumstances. And in terms of identity, individuals seemed to separate themselves from any homology within the community, resulting in a norm of individual distinction within the group. To a large degree this heightened individualism actually defined one of the norms within the community, which, when combined with the common representation of the individual as artist, as well as a general distinction between community members and ‘suburbanites’, delineated the boundaries of the group.

The second ethnography covered the Fremantle house party community. As with the previous study, this group included many different subgroups that integrated through a set of common social institutions. In this case the key relevant institutions were, once again, shared accommodation, some small local cafés and galleries and, most significantly, the house party; a regular informal event occurring on weekends in varied houses throughout Fremantle, typically hosting
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from 50 –200 patrons. In a similar vein to the Perth ethnography, this community contained a common public persona; that of a left wing, hedonistic and creative individual, which in some cliques also included contemporary hippy and new-age/spiritual sensibilities. What is particularly noteworthy in this chapter is the highly superficial nature of community relations. Individuals involved in this community flitted from group to group and from event to event, seemingly preferring the anonymity and lack of commitment that the superficial relations allowed. An effect of this was to produce a form of reciprocity that was more social than personal, in that individuals were typically not supported in their personal life, but were, through having a large pool of social events to attend, offered escape from isolation and loneliness. Also, their ‘anti-social’ behaviour, such as alcoholism, drug addiction and promiscuity, was generally accepted, regardless of its potentially destructive effects. So through maintaining superficial relations, this community allowed for non-committal and individualisation, while simultaneously generating events where individuals could engage with the surrounding community. There are many other themes that are hinted at in the ethnographies, which are teased out the three analysis chapters that follow.

The first of these chapters, chapter seven, concerns social structure and social relations. In the first part of this chapter, community is shown to be multiple, plural and partial: the sociality of the contemporary city is presented as being filled with many of these partial communities (Fischer 1975). In a similarly plural fashion, these communities are considered as being comprised of multiple
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“personal networks” (Wellman 1988) and it is the intersection of these networks that produces the larger sociality we know as community (Wellman 1979). So rather than trying to understand community as singular, whole and homogeneous, what these sections do is to show urban communities as ‘naturally’ plural, fractured and highly individualised. The second part of this chapter analyses the institutions from both ethnographies and shows how they are utilised to generate the bonds of community. One of these sections examines the physical institutions, such as the ‘share house’, the exhibition and the ‘house party’, and shows how these spaces act as nexus where individuals are integrated into the local socio-cultural norms and networks. Later sections examine the forms of interaction that occur in these spaces, namely the superficial interaction and gossip hinted at in both ethnographies.

The significance of superficiality is crucial to the thesis, as it is the principal mechanism that unites the many diverse individuals across the communities. Shallow or flippant conversation is the main form of communication at community events, and as such, it is the dominant form of communication that occurs across the entire community network. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, this means that a huge proportion of community network traffic is frivolous and secondly, that this type of communication is actually what being part of the community entails. So these communities are largely held together by outwardly pointless conversation, and to be part of these communities means one must engage in this form of communication. But there is another strength in this
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form of communication, which lies in both its generalisation and in its ability to keep individuals aloof from each other, while simultaneously bringing them into a communal discourse.

In terms of generalisation, through not focusing on topics that require intimate or deep knowledge, conversations remain essentially ‘open’, or requiring less ‘cultural capital’ than highly specialised, or ‘closed’ topics. By having reasonably open subject matter, the accessibility of conversations remains high, allowing for many ‘types’ of individuals, or many groups to interact without intimate knowledge of each other. This enables what Granovetter called “weak ties” (1973), or those associative network connections that potentially join disparate groups; what Putnam referred to as “bridging” social capital (2000: 23).

In terms of remaining aloof, superficiality allowed for a public persona that could simultaneously be part of a community, while also maintaining autonomy from that community. Both Sennett (1974; 1994) and Elias (1994) discuss the significance of this as a typical aspect of community interaction, where in order to be part of public life, or in Elias’ example, court society, individuals had to adopt very different public personas from their private ones. Their examples show the necessity of this aloofness and how it allowed for the enacting of one’s public self, but in this instance the aloofness also illustrates how individuals achieved relative autonomy while maintaining community ties. In superficiality we can see not only how individuality and community can exist concurrently, but also how
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this mechanism, through maintaining social distance, allows individuals to be part of *many* different communities at the same time. So by being open and aloof, superficiality has the power to unite many different types of people, essentially becoming the bridge between groups, and by allowing for autonomy. It also removes the necessity for singular commitment to any one community, allowing the many communities operating in the urban environment to co-exist, and for individuals to electively belong to a number of them.

Towards the end of this chapter, gossip is similarly shown to provide a uniting feature to community relations. Where, by engaging in speculation regarding other members of the community, the norms of the community are negotiated, transferred and acted upon. As with Granovetter’s (1973; 1983) position, gossip is shown to be incredibly effective in the transfer of community information, as well as being one of the focal points of community involvement (Gluckman 1963). So through individuals being involved in gossip they are, though discussing community activities, actively becoming part of the community and simultaneously spreading its norms.

Essentially this chapter looks at the plural and individuated nature of urban social groups as well as the social institutions that join them together into communities. In examining the plural nature of urban communities it shows a serious deficiency in singular, or monolithic, conceptions of communities, and in examining gossip
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and superficiality it shows the productive nature of social phenomena that are usually considered ‘unhealthy’.

The next chapter, chapter eight, analyses the significance of common culture and in particular the commonality that ‘art’ generates. As with the previous chapter this opens with an examination of the fractured nature of contemporary urban environment, but rather than examining the social, it examines the cultural fragmentation, and particularly the lack of singular cultural styles or homogeneity amongst contemporary urbanites. Unlike previous subcultural studies, such as Willis (1978) or Hebdige (1979), little in the way of homology between community members, as a whole, was found. However, what was of interest was that ‘art’ had a unifying function among the many cultural groupings occurring locally, but this was not ‘typical ‘art. The art being referred to here was urban street art, or the subcultural icons and styles of expression which have become, through magazines such as Juxtapoz, reified as art in their own right. Essentially this movement is a celebration of urban creativity in general, but focused on pan-subcultural activities. Examples of this are tattooing, stencil art and graffiti, all of which are not only markers of urban life, but also styles that stand in opposition to traditional ‘mainstream’ values. So what is being defined in this chapter is not so much a subculture, but a meta-narrative of non-mainstream creativity that has transcended cultural difference. Art, or being creative, has become a common theme amongst the many groups in the city, providing the cultural mechanism for generating the similar cultural perspectives necessary for community relations.
Another feature of art is in the way in which it generates the social space necessary for interaction. Through the system of displaying art or performing music, so the space for individuals and group interaction is created. In this context it is not so much the art itself that is significant, but its ability to draw individuals together and its power to generate social space. In this way art will be presented, not as an aesthetic device but as a means towards engaging in social activity. Similarly, through generating a common conversation topic art, and the particular conventions of the art form encountered, provide a vehicle for interaction, which once again points to the social significance of art over its aesthetic qualities. This section is heavily reliant on Sarah Thornton’s text on the art world (2008), which shows the overtly social set of norms that accompany entrance into this social environment.

The final point regarding art is how it generates individualised subjects. Through having whole communities focused on art and self-expression, what is achieved is a collective fascination with both ‘the self’ and the representation of the self as distinct from others. To a large degree then, the construction and representation of the self becomes an art form (Bauman 2008). Individuals construct personal collections of cultural and subcultural objects, combine this with highly personalised taste in popular culture, and then construct an idiosyncratic personal biography to produce a distinct public identity (Sennett 1974; Featherstone 1992). As such, this expression of self, essentially forces individuals to be heterogeneous
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and almost aloof from the community at large, but it is also heavily monitored to comply with local assumptions regarding ‘authenticity’, appropriateness and the level of deviance from community norms. So while, on one level, the construction of the self generates highly individualised subjects, this heightened sense of autonomy is part of the rhetoric of the researched communities.

The final chapter re-examines the focus on art but from a far less celebratory perspective. Rather than looking at the constructive nature of art to generate cohesion, it examines its ability to generate difference between those inside the community and those outside of it. Starting with Elias and Scotson’s *The Established and the Outsiders* (1994), this chapter looks at how notions of group superiority are constructed as part of the rhetoric of community, but rather than showing this in a negative light, it looks at the constructive nature of arrogance and self-righteousness as a tool for generating community cohesion. This is illustrated by taking the above example of art and showing that it is not necessarily ‘art’ that unites, but the illusion of creativity and the superiority that this engenders in the researched groups.

Here the concept of ‘the bohemian’ is developed as a stereotype of the passionate artist and fringe-dweller. The strength of this personality type, as with Simmel’s ‘stranger’ (1950c) or any other of his metropolitan character types (1973), is that it can be generalised across many social groups, and as such generates a basis of common understanding between groups. However, its main significance lies not
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in its signification of artistic capability, but more in its oppositional stance to mundane existence. The bohemian essentially becomes emblematic of everything that is not construed as ‘mainstream’. It is symbolic of an individual who is passionate, hedonistic, self-absorbed, absolutely opposed to ‘the work ethic’ but simultaneously opposed to middle and upper class accumulation (Wilson 2000). The bohemian then becomes a marker of distinction between those inside the community and the rest of the masses, while simultaneously positioning community members as infinitely superior to those that it denigrates. As such it maps quite readily onto Thornton’s oppositional schema of subcultural affiliation (Thornton 1995: 115), which is basically a cultural logic of ‘us versus them’.

However, while the constructed, and largely naïve, logic of community is pointed out, it is also shown how it is important for community functionality. Without the largely constructed difference between community members and those outside of the community, there would have been no separation from the rest of society and therefore no cause for celebration, or no bolstering of egos, thus making the community unattractive and essentially unprofitable to potential members. Also, given that it is arguably the celebration of this superiority that allows for much of the practice of community to operate effectively (Elias and Scotson 1994), rather than arrogance, superiority and self-righteousness being seen as negative personal traits, they should be seen as quite productive mechanisms for the building and maintenance of community.
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In sum, what is being represented in the thesis is a novel way to view communities. Rather than seeing them as the singular, homogeneous and wholesome environments implied by gemeinschaft conceptions, the thesis is attempting to reframe them as far more fractured, individualised and unashamedly superficial. However, this is not to lessen their effect, but to show that what constitutes a community does not necessarily map to conventional ideas on the subject. It also attempts to show that rather than contemporary social issues, namely individualisation and de-traditionalisation, resulting in the demise of community, what has actually occurred is a shift in what community entails; producing social structures that accommodate these cultural changes. Ultimately this thesis attempts to illustrate the plural, personal and elective aspects of contemporary community and to show that it does not have to exclusively comprise of what is traditionally viewed as ‘wholesome’ or ‘healthy’ social activities.

As a final introductory note, this thesis is not out to celebrate one form of social relation or lifestyle over another. Though there is a large focus on the subaltern, this is not to say that it is in anyway ‘better’ than other forms of community, but rather to show how social action, regardless of its form, can be productive. There are, of course, other mechanisms for community formation, such as the use of ethnicity, gender and local politics to mark the boundaries of ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups, but in this case these were not considered to be hugely significant. What should be pointed out though is how, if these mechanisms were included, they would, as Elias observed (1994: XV-LII), simply be part of the largely
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constructed and arbitrary arsenal of symbols utilised to generate the limits of the community, and as such, would adhere to the concepts and structures that this thesis examines.
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**Chapter 2: Methodology**

**Introduction.**

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research methodologies used in both the theoretical aspect and the data-gathering portion of the thesis. The first section covers the academic research, showing how theories on late modernity and gemeinschaft conceptions of community were examined and then paired against less romantic theories of both contemporary life and communal living. The second section begins with an overview of some theoretical issues regarding ethnography and then goes on to explain why certain approaches were chosen over others. Of particular importance is the reasoning behind selecting two study groups over one. As will be shown, by using two examples of community the research was provided with a form of validation, but also, and more importantly, this became a way to abstract the norms inherent in both examples, allowing for the themes traversing the two environments to come to the surface. As such the research came to be about examining the trends occurring in more than one site, making for a study of communities, as opposed to a singular community study.

This project set out to explore novel ways in which contemporary communities operated and to provide alternate ways to theorise them. The reasoning behind choosing this as a research topic was twofold. Firstly, through personal experience of everyday, or rather ‘everynight’, activities, it was evident that there was a
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phenomenal amount of non-commercial entertainment, such as house parties, ad-hoc exhibitions, illegal occupations of abandoned commercial space and social gatherings in spaces normally reserved for the arts. To a large degree, though not exclusively, these events were avoiding the system of alcohol licensing and seemed to be providing alternative spaces for the many local subcultures. Generally they were initiated through the energies of locals wanting to express their cultural tastes and revolved around creating a space for the performance of art, poetry, music and the general sociality associated with this. These events were locally planned and executed, which showed both a tremendous amount of organisation and also that there existed a large network of people working to create their own social environment.

The second reason behind choosing this research area was an interest in readings on late modernity, and in particular, writings that documented the demise of both subculture and community. In these generally dystopian writings there was a theme of social breakdown, typically brought about through the individualisation of society and de-traditionalisation of culture. But yet, there were large and well-connected groups of people creating their own cultural networks throughout the city: manufacturing the space in which to gather, and doing so with such momentum as to create their own local cultural trends. Based on this distinction between the theorized and the observable practices of community, it became evident that research into these practices, as well as into the functioning of urban community, was necessary.
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Theoretical research

A previous project examining local social institutions (Glackin 2005) had led to an interest in the nature of community, particularly in the face of such damning commentary of its demise coming from the aforementioned social analysts. The first stage of the research then was to examine the literature signalling this demise and to determine its validity. A number of texts were selected from the range of material on the topic, covering issues such as individualisation (Bauman 2001), risk (Beck 1992), the death of public life (Sennett 1974), the demise of public space (Zukin 1995), detraditionalisation (Heelas, Lash et al. 1996) and other topics that loosely adhered to the dystopian perspective of fluid capital (Lash and Urry 1987), liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and individual reflexivity (Giddens 1991). This provided familiarity with the relevant theorists and a solid background in the literature that was to be the theoretical backbone or in some ways the target of the thesis. However, what this broad ranging consideration of contemporary sociology showed was not so much the demise of community, but rather a nostalgic longing for idealistic, or gemeinschaft, community.

Given an increasing lack of trust in this general orientation towards the nature of community, a new area of research began that examined the theoretical assumptions behind it (Stacy 1969; Bell and Newby 1971; Anderson 1983; Cohen 1985; Delanty 2003; Hopper 2003; Day 2006; Cotteral 2007). An analysis of texts from this area illustrated the idealistic nature of the term ‘community’ and how, from its early inceptions, it has been associated with nostalgic imagery,
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particularly Tonnies ‘gemeinschaft’ (1963). Essentially, these texts showed the imaginary and constructed nature of this form of idealistic community, but also how it has had dramatic affect in defining what is accepted as valid examples of community and what is not.

If, based on these texts, community is largely imagined, then the next step was to determine the actual workings of community. For this a number of community studies that lay outside of gemeinschaft were examined (Warner and Lunt 1941; Foote Whyte 1943; Bensman and Vidich 1958; Becker 1963; Spradley 1970; Granovetter 1973; Bennett 1975; Willis 1977; Elias and Scotson 1994; Blokland 2003; Chambers 2006; Taylor 2006). These showed that rather than having qualities characteristic of ‘traditional’ community, the communities in question were actually quite fluid, hierarchical, often violent and not at all the idyllic social environments imagined.

From this it became evident that ‘community’ needed to be revisited, not from the perspective of fractured social space and the demise of communal living, but with the knowledge that community could actually be quite a superficial and exclusionary social order, centred on arrogance and the construction of deliberate socio-cultural hierarchies. However, rather than these qualities signalling the downfall of social order (based upon ‘unwholesome’ social practices), given their continued re-occurrence in community studies, it was more likely that they were actually key aspects of community construction.
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Once both the significance and the irrelevance of gemeinschaft had been established, the next step was to capture data from the field in order to obtain realistic data on the functionality of large groups.

Overviews of ethnographic method.

Given the wealth of possible methods, the first issue was to devise an overarching structure to the research. An initial consideration was to utilise some of Barry Wellman’s work on network theory to capture ‘maps’ of individual activity. However, from observation it was evident that the study group were so well connected, and so dynamically, that individual mapping would be a phenomenal task, potentially distracting from the research due to the intricacies of the task. And, as both Wellman (1988: 33; 1988b) and Cohen (1985) suggest, the structure of social systems does not explain cultural complexities or the ways in which the internal logic of communities is achieved. However, for the sake of clarity and formality, it was still necessary to ‘define’ the limits of the community.

What was necessary was a form of enquiry that: firstly, found the community and saw how it operated; secondly, gathered data from the participants in such a way as to not taint it with biased perceptions of what a community entailed or how it should operate; and thirdly, was iterative enough to allow for the constantly shifting focus of the research. To this end an initial round of participant observation was decided on, followed by a series of recorded conversational
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interviews. In this way, some of the pitfalls of over-structuralisation and bias could potentially be avoided. However, and not surprisingly, these forms of data gathering also had their constraints and shortcomings. The information below attempts to deal with some of the key concerns pertaining to this form of information gathering. Essentially it deals with formality, representation, reflexivity, bias and the synthesis between the micro and the macro, or rather the applicability of micro research to the greater environment. The ultimate aim of which was to have a formal and reliable methodology that allows for an iterative, inductive and valid approach towards data collection and analysis (O'Reilly 2005: 4).

**Research Formality**

In his text, *Community and Everyday Life*, Graham Day suggests that even for the traditionally “slippery” concepts of sociology, ‘community’ is one of the most vague and without specific meaning (2006: 1). Delanty, similarly posits it as one of those ‘difficult’ words, and rather than defining it directly, treats the reader to a three thousand year history of the concept, (2003: 7-49). Cohen has such an issue with it that rather than imposing a meaning on it he retreats to a position where he says that the embedded individual is the only ‘true’ repository of community (1985). Even Bauman has difficulty with it, though he does say that it is a ‘warm’ concept, something that is thought of as ‘nice’ and ‘good’, regardless of what it actually is (2001: 1). Given this fuzziness, and particularly the ‘warmth’ that Bauman mentions, it is, and has been, quite easy to get confused about its meaning. Or even worse, to get caught up in misrepresentations such as
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promoting the local over the global, being uncritical, celebrating cultural difference, or of avoiding a methodological framework altogether (Kincheloe and McLaren 2003). There are a number of pitfalls then. One could be overly romantic, too vague about meaning and function, overly celebratory or too pessimistic, all of which put research on very shaky ground, methodologically, as they show the premise behind the research to be flawed, resulting in poor data. The first issue then is one of formality, where in order to maintain the integrity of the research, a reasonably strict, disciplined and ultimately defendable, method must be achieved.

In terms of formality, David Silverman’s work is striving for a defensible and reliable system of social analysis through the reapplication of ethnomethodological analysis, social pragmatics and rigour. Some ways he suggests to take qualitative analysis out of the ‘quagmire of validity’ are through comparative analysis, comprehensive data treatment, the ‘refutability principle’ and deviant case treatment, all of which deal with creating final results that are as definite as qualitative analysis can get, and speak directly to the issues of scientific rigour (Silverman 2000:160). By analysing multiple cases, examining the data from multiple perspectives, and by attempting to refute our argument, we will have a result that is reproducible, observationally correct and methodologically valid. Berg similarly suggests utilising lines of action, or triangulation, whereby multiple sources, and/or methods, are employed in order to gain verification of results or of one’s analysis of a phenomenon. And by using
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multiple operations, we acquire multiple patterns or vectors of data, and the convergence of these vectors gives us a more valid result (Berg 2001: 6).

Given these theories of method, using multiple sources was necessary for the validity of data, and was the first step towards a solution to the problem of method. By taking several approaches to data gathering and theoretical analysis, and not adhering to a limiting and overtly scientific method, but instead showing that through many approaches a similar result was reached, a final proposition could be produced that would be at once qualitative and formally defendable. The result of this for the methodology was twofold. Firstly it showed that more than one study was necessary and secondly it revealed the necessity for open-ended and triangulated interviews. While it was certain that the interviews would be conversational, they still had to be organised and consistent enough so as to gather definite, rather than spurious, inaccurate or non-representational data.

In order to maintain a solid level of rigour and establish defensible conclusions, two research groups across two different sites were chosen for comparison. In addition, interviews were conducted with an array of people so that the claims made by interviewees could be checked against the positions taken by others.

**Representation of subjects**

A number of paradigms have emerged that aid in reflecting the position of the subject. The first is similar to domain analysis, where constructs used by the informants are analysed and categorised. This involves the study of the categories
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and stories used by informants to gain a view into how the subject sees themselves in relation to the world around them (Strauss and Corbin 1988: 19). Where, by paying attention to the narratives and metaphors being used, rather than just questions pertaining to research, an overview of the social and cultural schema utilised by the participant can be constructed out of the linguistic domains and classifications being used (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 91).

How this aids with representation is twofold, firstly it brings the focus back onto the subject, and secondly, it helps researchers remove themselves from their own theoretical groundings. Through listening to the stories from the subjects perspective, we are getting not only their perspective on certain issues, but we are also getting their personal classificatory view of the world. This method however, cannot be implemented in a static and predetermined interview, this sort of information will usually only come from an informant who is relaxed and talking fluidly, so a prerequisite for this sort of information would be an informal, open ended interview or some form of participant observation (Crane and Angrosino 1974: 56).

Another way to attempt to address the issue of representation, but with more of an emphasis on the place of the subject, is the concept of the ‘para-ethnographer’ (Holmes and Marcus 2005: 1110). Here the topic of power is addressed and the informant raised from the ranks of subject to the position of an assistant. In this instance, the informant is assumed to have local and specific knowledge,
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especially in technical or heavily institutionalised areas, and is therefore more in a position to guide the research than the ethnographer is. Their issues become our issues, their knowledge helps build the research, and they drive where, what and who we consider to be relevant to the phenomenon, and ultimately what the research will entail. Furthermore, the subject leads the way with regard to which areas are visited during the ethnography. In this way both the ethnographer and the study benefit from obtaining a more valid representation of the life-world of the subject, as well as obtaining local knowledges through allowing the informant to guide the ethnographer through their world.

This point was particularly important. Not only did it have a great impact on the type of interview being ran, which was essentially open and where the informant was only minimally guided on their choice of subject matter, it also allowed the interviewee to guide aspects of the study. So to a large extent, the interviewees were going to tell me their views, suggest where to go, what to do, what was important for the research and hopefully introduce other interviewees.

Furthermore, by allowing the respondents to freely address any issues they saw fit, it simultaneously allowed greater insight into their everyday construction of community, but, more importantly, provided a number of everyday terms and stories from which to construct a model of how they conceptually ordered the world.
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All of this presupposes that the participant actually has valid data pertaining to the community, and this could prove problematic, as it potentially gives the subject too much authority and could lead research astray. But given the spread and number of respondents, as well as the themes that quickly emerged, this fear proved to be unwarranted.

Reflexivity

As mentioned, a history of interaction had led to some novel nightlife experiences, and given that a large aspect of the research involved immersion in, and description of, these events, reflexivity became an issue. Would it be permissible to mention personal enjoyment, fear or isolation at specific events? Would it be outside of the formal research protocols to have an emotive response, as opposed to a formal academic voice, or would this simply be taken as navel gazing?

This issue of reflexivity is a hot topic in the literature on qualitative analysis. Most opinions concerning this seem to be converging around the concept of the ‘autoethnography’, or at least the validity of author representation in qualitative work. Autoethnography is an attempt to get the ethnographer to relinquish the ‘God’s eye view’ (Gergen and Gergen 2003: 560) through incorporating themselves into the narrative. The concept suggests that by examining respondents’ feelings, and the tensions that come with immersion in a culture, the writer becomes part of the story, resulting in a document where the reader can see the effects of the environment on the ethnographer and can make up their own mind. This attempts
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to remove the authoritative voice from the ethnographer, arguably making for a less biased text, though ultimately some form of bias is still inevitable.

The basis for these views flows on from the idea of the ethnography as a construct, where the text, though presented as ‘truth’, is actually a product of the researcher’s formal training, their biases, the writing conventions of their field and their assumptions regarding the validity and meaning of data. Ethnographic reports are typically “partial truths” (Clifford 1986); documents manufactured by experts that, through the sheer volume of information, must leave out some data and give priority to others. One way around this is to treat the ethnography as a story from one of the subjects. In this way the descriptions and feelings of the author in the field can show the reader, as opposed to telling them about the community under review.

Coffey and Atkinson provide a more formal understanding of this topic by showing the significance of narratives and metaphors as a key way to understand locals and groups. Through the structure, function and morality inherent in stories, the social group under analysis reveals its hierarchies, functions and worldview (1996: 67-91). And if the ‘story as meaning making tool’ concept is valid for the rest of society, then it is also valid for ethnographers and ethnographies. So as we construct the world through stories, and ethnography is just a story, then it is perfectly valid to be openly reflexive, or to immerse ourselves in the story (Usher 1997: 35). The auto-ethnography takes this concept further still, where the author
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presents the ethnography as his or her own story. The experiences encountered
during the fieldwork are expressed as the viewpoint of the researcher; everything
comes from their eyes and position, the result of which is twofold. Firstly, the
god-like status of the ethnographer is reduced, as they are personally in the text,
experiencing the phenomenon with the subjects. The ethnography becomes first
and foremost a story told from the perspective of the ethnographer, and his or her
biases become more transparent as we see them as human subjects describing
events that they are involved in (Gergen and Gergen 2003: 580). Secondly, rather
than the analyst attempting to remain aloof, they, through their immersion in
events, can further the reader’s understanding of the subject by relaying personal
feeling and emotions. The reader can then see the personal growth, or decline, of
the ethnographer as they follow their progress through the environment. This also
provides greater depth in narrative, allowing for a more holistic understanding of
the presented ethnographic experience (Jones 2005).

So, once the inevitable bias of the researcher, and the question of representation
are considered, reflexivity appears to be a reasonably valid approach to both get
the reader emotionally attached to the story, and to make the ethnographic
construct more transparent than is potentially the case with more positivist
scientistic approaches. However, and Silverman is quite firm on this, while it is
acceptable to be reflexive and ‘daring’, it is not suitable to do so at the expense of
good sociology; for then a rigorous and valid account of social phenomenon gives
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way to personal development and the aforementioned navel gazing (Silverman 1997: 251).

To an extent then, it was reasonable to include personal details in the argument, but not to the extent that the central meaning, or the point of the thesis, was lost. This turned out to also be particularly important, as it was through including personal information in the ethnographic details that the ways in which individuals met, socialised and felt could be presented.

Bias

Through reading a number of ethnographies and through some personal soul searching, it became evident that ethnographers go into the field armed with prior knowledge, bias and theoretical underpinnings. This can occur in a number of levels, but personally it became obvious that I was bound to a number of theoretical assumptions. These were firstly a set opinion on what it was that I was looking for, in other words I was looking for a community, or rather, an established subculture with clear boundaries. The second bias I held was in my approach. As mentioned, the initial proposal was to attempt to disprove some macro theorists’ perceptions of contemporary community, but this focus started to become so significant that it began to overshadow the research into how community operates. Essentially blinding me to what was actually in the field as I only focused on phenomenon that agreed with my argument.
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With regard to bias, Strauss and Corbin’s *grounded theory* brings the attention of the researcher to the structures that they carry with them when entering the field, and point to the ways in which theory surrounding the phenomenon under discussion may result in a predetermined or erroneous result. An example of this is Willis’ *Learning to Labour* (Willis 1977), which, while being an ethnographic classic and rigorous in its data gathering, ends up aligning itself with the then popular neo-Marxist conception of cultural ‘resistance’ (Marcus 1986: 82). So while it is arguably the pinnacle of contemporary ethnography, its analysis is based on the macro theorising of others, effectively limiting the resulting account and potentially questioning the validity of the report. To comply with grounded theory methodologies, researchers should endeavour (as to actually achieve this is highly unlikely) to limit the theory they take with them into the field. While theory may be used to frame research, it should not limit or blind investigators to the social world around them. Instead the theories should actually come from the field that is being observed (Strauss and Corbin 1988: 12).

The methods used for going about this involve a similar approach to acquiring the lived reality of the subjects as mentioned above, but also concentrate heavily on the way the data is treated after field research is completed, and in particular the way data is coded. Rather than code the data or put it into final categories, ‘open coding’, creates lines of action, or “axial coding” (Strauss and Corbin 1988: 126), which allows for themes to develop within the data itself, rather than coming from the analyst. Essentially the data is coded in such as way as to not delimit the
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possible outcomes. Then as more and more data is coded so themes, or axes, emerge that show the patterns within it. Data is then coded along these lines to eventually produce solid and ‘grounded’ theory (Strauss and Corbin 1988: 104-133). So by following a model similar to the grounded theory approach it is supposedly possible to remain outside, or at least be aware of, the theoretical limitations of the researcher, and to simultaneously produce theory rather than purely utilising it.

The methodological positions and theories above, though attempts to tackle quite real issues in social research, are still just theories. And while the rigour and formality they argue for, as well as the bias they address, is admirable, to a large extent it is idealistic, rather than a possibility of being a reality.

As already outlined, all ethnography is partial and represents an incomplete picture of the lives of those under investigation. In this way it could be claimed that ethnography represents a biased form of analysis. It is also the case that social scientists bring to the tasks of research their own preconceived set of interests, unique social histories and varied theoretical suppositions and preferences. However as is pointed out by Silverman, the same may be said for all other forms of social scientific research. One important way to balance this is to begin with a thorough consideration of oneself and make public one’s predilections, penchants and inclinations.
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Micro-macro and validity

A final consideration is that of interplay between micro and macro research, particularly the notion of the wider relevance of an essentially micro study of quite localised community practices. George Marcus addresses this interaction between the minute and the overarching in two ways. Firstly, the complexity of the system must be recognised. As ethnographers, we are trying to capture the lived reality of the subjects. However this lived reality is an inherently complex and poly-vocal one, requiring many voices and many perspectives in order to adequately cover the many cultural spaces and identities that each subject, let alone multiple subjects, have. The issue of poly-vocality then is prime and in order to obtain adequate reflections of social life we must begin by obtaining dialogue based, or ‘dialogical’, data from a number of perspectives (Saukko 2005: 349). In this way the diversity of opinions in a locality can be captured, which will provide a better overall picture of the area, or community, as well as more adequately represent the effects of the macro on the micro.

The second, and in my mind more pertinent point, is the representation of the micro-macro division, and on this point there are a number of approaches. The first is the issue of division itself. This argument essentially examines the constructed nature of the concepts ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ and how the distinction between them has become so entrenched as to seem natural. As Marcus says: ‘This bridge [between micro and macro] was achieved through the segmentation of everyday life into supposedly universal categories such as religion, economics,
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politics, ecology and kinship” (1998: 35). The interpersonal schema that large
groups subscribe to have been abstracted to become the macro theory, those
actions positioned outside of these grand narratives have become the micro and
this perspective has become so entrenched as to become a factual distinction
rather than a categorical one.

More ‘realistic’ interpretations would see the interaction between the two
‘spheres’ of social action, where individuals are influenced by the structures about
them and similarly those individuals affect large social structures. In essence then,
similar critiques that are levelled at quantitative analysis, regarding its unrealistic
and overtly simplified modelling of the social, can also be applied to qualitative
studies that presume the categorisations of micro and macro are real. In this
regard then, to separate the two themes of micro and macro is inadequate for this
form of research, as both are related and intertwined.

The second perspective on this issue is the largely synchronic nature of
ethnographic studies of community. Though potentially well aware of historical
effects upon the subject, ethnographers generally place themselves in the present.
As a result ethnography can be deemed to be partly blind to the forces that led to
the creation of both the community and their present situation (Marcus 1986: 96),
or as essentially giving precedence to the micro. This type of research almost
deliberately avoids the macro, as it exists outside of the ‘locale’ where
ethnography traditionally takes place, and as such has the propensity to make the
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work far more ‘partial’ than is necessary. To this end ethnography cannot remain exclusively local, but must in some way address the problems of the surrounding structure (Holmes and Marcus 2005: 1103). By taking the local with the global, or utilising both micro and macro, the ethnographer is in a better position to capture the totality of social forces at work. Furthermore, they are also in a better position to generalise about those communities outside of the research or to abstract their findings and transfer their knowledge from the local to the global.

What is almost more important than attempting to look at the micro, is the reading between multiple subjects, analysing what Holmes and Marcus refer to as the ‘complex connections’ between subjects or communities. Where, by analysing the connections and interstitial spaces, we get to see both the multiple influences and powers acting upon the subject and the similarities between the parts, giving the analyst a greater overall picture of the environment under review. This ‘multi-sited fieldwork’ (Holmes and Marcus 2005: 1103) attempts to get away from the ‘partial’, singular and inherently romanticised concept of communal life, or what Raymond Williams termed “knowable communities” (1975: 202), where it is assumed that it is possible to achieve a final and overarching image of the subject. But through examining more than one site, and then examining the tensions between those sites, we can begin to see the processes that are common to both. In other words, we can no longer look at the community as though we can completely understand it or the processes that drive it, rather it is in the spaces
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between the communities, and how these communities affect each other, where we can see the macro within the micro (Marcus 1998: 82).

The formation of a method

In accordance with Marcus’ multi-sited ethnography, this became a study that involved more than one site. Initially three sites were chosen, but due to time restrictions placed on the research, as well as the surplus of data that was gathered from the field, this was reduced to two sites. The benefits of multiple locations was that by using two sites the issue of wider relevance would be addressed, and instead of simply being a study of a single local community it became a study of consistent themes across urban communities more generally. Furthermore, by taking in two areas of study, a cross examination of multiple subjects in multiple areas was achieved, which benefited the validity of the exercise. Accompanying this validation of data and results was a methodology whereby multiple sources were invited to comment on the issues surrounding the research, and these sources would be interviewed at least twice in order to obtain definite and validated data from all members of the study group. This was followed by a focus group to obtain consensus on issues and to observe group behaviour. The result of this form of ‘cross referencing’ was that observations or data that was not supported, or denied, by others, was excluded as being significant to the functioning of the community,

In terms of bias, it seemed that by far the largest concern, especially in the data gathering stage, would be the presumption of group boundaries and the erroneous
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bracketing of personally constructed community. For this reason it seemed best to opt for a ‘snowballing’ effect with relation to informants. This required entering the field and allowing the community to dictate the informants and the community boundaries. So rather than actively looking for certain types of informants, the internal referencing of the community directed research to significant spaces and subjects. Bias was further reduced through giving the informants the power of ‘para-ethnographer’, where, they essentially led the research, through steering both fieldwork and interviews to suit their conceptions of community. So essentially, the community guided my perception of their community, as opposed to having my views of ‘community’ imposed upon them.

Related to this ‘free forming’ or ‘guided flaneur’ style of ethnography is the issue of reflexivity, where though documenting movement, both physically and emotionally, through the community, I would be revealing its workings, as opposed to attempting to analyse it or to provide abstract conceptions. Here a personal description would suffice, as it showed best the ways in which the community affects, not only the subjects, but also the ethnographer.

The result of all the above theoretical approaches was a method that attempted to give the subject as much freedom as was possible, in terms of personally defining both their community and their representation of it. The effect of this was to allow them to partly redirect the research into spaces they deemed appropriate and to interview those they considered worthwhile. Utilising the subject as ‘para-
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ethnographer’ and utilising ‘autoethnography’ techniques allowed for the data to become a narrative, and in this way the lived reality of community members was captured. This ‘open’ style was balanced by triangulating all data through multiple interviews, focus groups and through having two research sites. To further remove bias Strauss and Corbin’s ‘grounded theory’ and their ‘axial coding’ was utilised in the coding stages.

The Methodology of Fieldwork

Above I have attempted to describe some of the themes that influenced the direction of eventual methodology. Below I describe the methodologies actually used in the research and how these theoretical positions played out both in the field and during analysis. Both of these communities were chosen as they were not outwardly expressive of ‘typical’ community. However, regardless of this, they still performed many of the functions of community, such as generating very explicit cultural norms, integrating its members and being able to generate feeling of belonging. As such, though they appeared outwardly chaotic and fractured, they still satisfied the criteria for being a community.

Fremantle, Western Australia.

As I have been living in Fremantle for ten years, and have been directly involved with the local community, there was a high probability that personal information could colour the research. To this end, a system was formulated to make the everyday ‘strange’ and rather than interviewing friends, a number of
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acquaintances were asked to suggest potential respondents. When these individuals were interviewed they were each also asked to supply another subject. In this way the paradigm of the para-ethnographer came to be utilised, where respondents were used to acquire other respondents and to suggest community ‘hot-spots’ for consideration. This resulted in fifteen subjects, all of who were open to multiple interviews, and all of whom were connected to me through the local network by at least one degree of separation.

One of the benefits of this method was that it closely mimicked the local norm of socially ‘stumbling’ through the community and meeting the friends of friends but there were also potential hazards. This system could potentially produce a closed, non representational, set of interviewees, but in this case it was actually required. It was important for the community to reveal its cliques, associations, hierarchies and biases, rather than these being imposed upon it by a biased researcher. However, to ensure valid representation, a number of lines of inquiry were followed, utilising a wide array of sources, resulting in a number of different ‘vectors’ of research. A second issue was that of the ‘idealised respondent’, where potentially only those considered ‘ideal’ would be referred as a respondent. To an extent this did initially occur, with most of the early respondents having seemingly unlimited social lives and very high levels of network connectivity. However, these respondents quite explicitly showed the belief structure of the community, where, as they were put forward as paragons of the community, their outstanding traits must embody those that the community values. So while the
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research does potentially suffer from issues of a non-representational nature, these are not a cause for concern.

With regard to interviews, the questions for the first round involved the individuals’ perceptions of their place in the world and how they felt about their locality. This was usually a loosely coherent conversation that revealed biases, worldviews and general opinions of the respondents, as well as how they perceived their community. This first round of interviews established a range of cultural similarities, or community norms, which produced some key themes regarding how the symbolic boundaries of the community were constructed.

The second round of questions were more formal and related to the mechanics of the community. Each interviewee was asked about their current social networks, where they go, what they do, how they talk to people, what they gossip about and, importantly, to describe from start to finish a recent night out. This last point was also an example of para-ethnography in action, where not only were respondents providing field notes, but were also allowed to interpret their evening. By examining the recounted socialisation of interviewees, and also their critique of their own forms of interaction, an understanding emerged of not only how individuals interacted, but also how they imagined their interaction and what these events meant. From this information a cultural scheme became apparent, one that included how ‘deep’ conversations could get, what was appropriate sexual behaviour, what levels of autonomy were allowed, how ‘out of control’ one could
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be before being restrained or gossiped about and roughly how many conversations each individual had in one night. In other words, a map of community norms and how they were regulated became apparent.

The series’ of interviews ended with a focus group. This was run in two sections. The first concerned formal aspects of the research and required informants to come to consensus regarding pertinent issues unearthed during research, while the second was a set of informal conversations generally centred on the community. While the first meeting aided in the consolidation of key themes, it was actually the second that was most informative, due to the group simply talking about community issues, and in doing so revealing many norms regarding conversation, gossip and local consensus on morality.

These three levels of interviews, as well as a number of phone calls took a total of two months. As a supplement to the interviews, a number of local social events were attended at which field notes were taken. These comprised of three gigs, four house parties, four exhibition openings and a number of daytime or early evening meetings at a local food hall. Afterwards, these events were written up in their entirety; from hearing about them, contacting others to see if they were going, the social activity that occurred at events, which included both my own activity and the observable activity of others, and the post-event discussions that usually accompany an evenings’ socialising. As with interviewees, these events were typically suggested by members of the research group.
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In terms of analysis, data from interviews was transcribed and notes about the general themes covered in each part of the interview were taken. This occurred incrementally, so as each interview was recorded it was transcribed and annotated. Once all initial interviews had finished a process of coding began, where common themes amongst the data were found. This ‘axial coding’ started to produce a number of recurrent themes within the data, such as the aforementioned cultural similarity of respondents. The second round of interviews focused on these themes in an attempt to validate the outcomes of the first set of interviews, as well as trying to discover the inner workings of the community.

A similar process occurred with the field notes from participant observation, but in this case there was little in the way of coding, or of direct data creation. The observations worked more to validate data that came from the interviews, or to bring certain issues to the fore, such as the large amount of meetings in a short space of time or the regularity with which these people met. The participant observation material was treated more as a framing device (as a lens to look through), whereas the actual meaning or significance applied to the interaction was gathered from the individuals themselves. All names and distinguishing features that would allow these individuals to be recognised were changed for reasons of anonymity. Images generally did not include informants, but those that did were approved prior to inclusion in the thesis. Place names were retained for reasons of consistency.
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Perth

As with the above, the individuals chosen from this area did not represent a ‘typical’ community, but yet satisfied many criteria that are a product of community relations. The research for this phase began at The Bakery, a performance space and gallery that has a reputation for the presenting the avant-garde. Through polling audience members a number of initial contacts were made, which began the ‘snow balling’ process of informant gathering described above. It was at this early stage that a problem of both representation and bias arose.

From the observations and informal conversations at this event it was clear that this was not a coherent or closed group, but rather a diverse set of individuals from many subcultures. This created the issue of how to adequately bracket the community, as the homology that existed in both traditional community studies and analysis of subculture could not, at least initially, be observed. Some wore punk looking clothing, some looked like a mixture of hippies and ravers, some like rappers and others were wearing suits, but very tightly cut and obviously symbolic of some subcultural turn. Most, however wore aspects from many subcultures, creating a diversity that, aside from its ‘non-mainstream’ look, was nondescript. Similarly the spread of ages, roughly 18-50, was unexpected, and, given the difference of opinion that was presumably going to come from this group, how was it to be represented?
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After this event local ‘arty’ boutiques and subculture shops were polled for more information on the makeup of the scene. This led to the almost immediate finding of the norm of cultural crossover between urban cultures, as opposed to the segregation of separate subcultures. What started to emerge was that there was not just one ‘art scene’, or subculture, operating locally, but a network comprising of many groups around Perth, many of whom knew of each other and all of whom seemed to dress ‘alternatively’. There was a punk subculture and a goth subculture, and while both of these had their own space for exclusive punk or goth events, there was also a lot of crossover between the two groups. There was also a skate culture and an alternative hip-hop culture. Likewise, both of these urban cultures also had their own space, but also seemed to intersect. Added to this were the graffiti culture, the street art culture, the photographers, the artists, the ravers, and the musicians from all genres. All of these people seemed to regularly overlap so that members of these groups became known to each other, blurring the boundaries of what group people belonged to and also blurring the edges of each subculture. Essentially, from what was discernable, what was happening was a city-wide milieu of ‘alternative’ or ‘cool’, where many individuals, who would previously have existed in one urban culture, were mixing with many others, and, it seemed to be focused on art; be it in a studio, a boutique, a skate shop or on a wall.

So rather than this being a study of a’ traditional’ gemeinschaft community, it was actually going to be a study of how culture plays out in the city to create a cultural
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network, or ‘community’ of like minded individuals. It was only at this point that the realisation of the similarity between this group and the Fremantle group emerged. As having been personally involved, the realisation that there was little in the way of sartorial regulation, or any other way of defining the group, had not been evident, but when taken with the ‘multi sited fieldwork’, (or choosing two communities over one), this became obvious. All of these individuals had ‘different’ jobs, or no jobs at all, some were artists, some musicians, some architects or professionals, but there was a similarity in outlook which, when combined with regular socialising, was breeding a distributed, or ill-defined, community of vaguely subcultural urbanites.

The three weeks of initial research and informal (unrecorded and brief) interviews provided a number of key sites in the community, which included pubs, late night cafés, galleries and the counter-culture, or arty/alternative boutiques. Initial respondents took me to these places and introduced more informants who became involved in the research.

At this point formal interviews were run. As per Fremantle, the initial interviews were open ended, general conversation questions, designed to encourage conversational flow and generate ‘worldviews’, rather than to answer specific questions. These interviews were treated in the same way as the Fremantle interviews; annotated, coded and then analysed for central themes. After this the process of consolidating these central themes began, and, while still going to local
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events, the second round of interviews started, examining the ways in which these people operate as a group. For this series of interviews, rather than asking for general views, individuals were steered towards issues regarding community, such as opinions of their friends and associates, what annoyed them about the area, people that they didn’t like and some examples of gossip. As a final part of the interview process, a group session was arranged, but due to prior commitments on the part of the subjects and possibly other factors, this did not eventuate as planned, but did result in a large group of people meeting at a pub, which served the same function.

The fieldwork for this part of the research took three months. In total eighteen people were interviewed, nine of them twice. Fieldwork took the form of going with interviewees to events and asking them to suggest places of interest. While in the field roughly two events per week were attended, including small meetings in cafes and pubs, gigs, poetry readings, exhibition opening nights, popular nights in a local bar/night club, and numerous nights in a popular late night café/wine bar, both observing and interviewing people.

In total, the research, including fieldwork, documentation and preliminary analysis, took eight months for both study groups; this was made up of five months in the field and three months of documenting and coding.
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Conclusion

Through choosing two research groups the research methodology has attempted to generate a vehicle for analysing urban communities in general, as opposed to simply being a study of a single community. An additional benefit of this dual form of enquiry has been the cross-referencing of data from one group to another, thus acting as a form of validation of data and results.

Further validating exercises were worked through by including a wide spread of interviewees, using multiple sources to obtain interviewees and through cross-referencing data obtained in interviews with information gathered from other interviewees. Iteration and repetition during interviews was consistent, incorporating similar and triangulated questions of interviewees, but not guided so as to force similar responses. Rather, informants were required to provide their own description of their worldview, personal histories and responses to local phenomena, as well as to provide information about their current socialising habits and friendships. How this was included in the analysis stage was to let the themes in the data develop through a system of axial coding, where the coding of data, and the layering of multiple data, led to the creation of major and minor themes in the research. Not only did this form of coding allow for themes to emerge from the data, it also generated a partial solution to issues of personal bias and prior assumptions on community formation and maintenance.
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Bias was also addressed through actively including participants in the research. To a large extent they suggested the research spaces, events, additional subjects and showed what they considered to be the ‘heart’ of the community. This ‘para-ethnographer system’ proved beneficial, particularly in showing the boundaries of the communities. It also proved to be of immense benefit in terms of representation, as, to a large degree, the interviewees provided descriptions of their social life and how they imagined themselves to be.

In conclusion, what is set out above is a methodology showing that the issues of bias, validation, reflexivity, representation, applicability and research design have been considered. Though these concerns have been addressed, to presume that they have been completely avoided would be naïve: as all individuals carry bias; representation will always be problematic; and validation/formality will remain in perpetual debate. However, through acknowledging these pitfalls and attempting to avoid them, in this thesis I have attempted to provide a defensible and formal, but yet realistic ethnographic methodology, and in doing so attempting to create an ‘iterative, inductive’ (O'Reilly 2005: 27) and ultimately ‘reliable’ ethnography.

The next chapter examines the theoretical underpinnings of ‘community’ and in particular gemeinschaft. In it the constructed and heavily romanticised ideal of community is examined and shown to have continued influence today, particularly in its effect on late-modern social theory.
Chapter 3: The significance of gemeinschaft

Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman’s Community (2001) is a dark reflection on the nature of group belonging. Though he opens with some romantic terms connected with the word, such as ‘warm’, ‘cosy’ and ‘caring’, he then shows how this perspective of community (as a romantic ideal) has come to dominate social discourse, producing an understanding of community that is not what it truly is. The contemporary quest for community, says Bauman, comes not from actually living together or sharing a common cultural perspective, instead it derives from romance, fear and overarching individuality, where people are running away from solid identities and obligation en-masse, to produce a ‘stampede’ away from both commitment and community. And it is this stampede that is contemporary community. As he says:

The secession [from community] is hardly ever lonely – the escapees are keen to join company with other escapees like them, and the standards of the escapee life tend to be as stiff and demanding as those which have been found oppressive in the life left behind (2001: 52).

This ‘escapee life’ produces not communities, but ‘lifestyles’, or sets of commodities and imagined relations, all of which exist simply to provide some
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security and consistency to a life spent ‘on the run’ from commitment. They are based on nothing more than consuming popular commodity culture, and as such are intrinsically unhealthy, pointless and vacuous.

A number of authors have taken up this argument, but from different positions. Brooks (2000) for example, shows how the quest for distinction has generated a culture of “bourgeois bohemians” or sets of individuals that separate themselves from ‘mundane’ cultural activity by purchasing ‘authentic’ and eclectic products. They also attempt to define themselves as outside of traditional career and life paths, a phenomenon that Lasch (1979) attributes to the “culture of narcissism” inherent in contemporary society and which, due to individuals’ focus on individual distinction, signals the demise of community.

Another perspective on individualisation and community is that of Lash and Urry. In their text on the shifting nature of economic relations and its effect on populations, they show how, due to the changing nature of contemporary business and the fast transfer of capital, cultures now move with frightening speed. This results in the forced movement of individuals to new locations and the demise of traditional communities, as they fail to keep up with the speed of change. The effect of this is to produce a society where, quoting Marx, “All that is solid … melts into air” (Lash and Urry 1987: 313) generating a society where nothing is concrete and where each cultural group, or rather each individual, generates their own cultural perspectives as they react to the situations around them.
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In fact, the amount of material produced on this theme is so immense as to almost be a social movement in itself. Anthony Giddens, the archetypical foundation for this ‘late-modern’ perspective, shows how, due to having greater ‘institutional reflexivity’, individuals are manufacturing their own identities and are becoming more anxious, alienated and alone as a result (1991). Ulrich Beck shows how we are generating elective biographies and as a result becoming “homo optionus”, or humans who demand choice and distinction from others above all else (2002: 5). Bauman continually draws attention to what he calls ‘liquid modernity’, a reference to the fluidity of contemporary existence and the lack of solidity in any social or cultural institution (2000; 2001; 2001; 2002; 2008). Sennett (1998; 2006), Virilio (2005), Bellah (1985), Elliot (2006), Van-Dijk (1999) and Putnam (2000) to name a few, all in some way cover the rise of individualisation, the fall of community as a significant social phenomenon, and as changing of society for the worse. However, all of these authors, though they herald the demise of community, also imply its significance as a tool for social order, cohesion and mental health. And while most of them, at least partly, explore the concept, as well as its constructed nature, not one of them posits life as better off without community, or as having an inherently improved life due to the freedoms that individuated life allows. As such the argument is very one sided in favour of ‘tradition’. But what Bauman also does is to critique our fascination with it.
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Referring to Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City*, Bauman starts to describe the conception of community as being ultimately poetic. This builds on Williams’ thesis concerning the nature of the rural idyll. Where, based initially on his reflections of his childhood, he begins an examination of rural communities and their representation. Tracing back the literary descriptions of community, he uncovers the pattern of romantic idealisation of rural life, leading back to conceptions of *The Garden of Eden*. From this perspective, community becomes a paradise lost; an intangible, deeply romantic and constructed ‘memory’ of the idyllic (1975: 18-22). With this conception, community becomes a romantic quest and something that never truly existed, or as Bauman puts it:

In short, ‘community’ is the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly love to inhabit and which we hope to repossess (2001: 3).

So community as we know it is essentially mythic and based on nostalgic and romantic conceptions of rural life. But this romance does not just lie in literature, there are also sociological foundations for it.

Tonnies’ conception of gemeinschaft (community), as distinct from gesellschaft (society), began the formal theorising of community as an abstract sociological form. This conception essentially polarised social structures into two forms; the dense, homogeneous and archaic type, versus the heterogeneous, legal and plural
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...type. And had the effect of creating, within sociology, a binary opposition between the two. The effects of this simplification have been manifold, resulting in, on one hand the notion of community as a social panacea (Etzioni 1993). But on the other hand, the loss of this mythic and imagined sense of community has signalled the dissolution of traditional order and the demise of the social structure necessary to maintain public order and coherence, resulting in the social commentary of Beck, Bauman, Sennett and the other authors mentioned above.

So by reifying in the concept of community, as imagined by Tonnies, and then imagining its demise, it appears as though we have lost our paradise, whereas if the writings of Williams and, ironically, Bauman, are correct, it was never there in the first place.

However, regardless of how real this notion of community is, it has become real, and the romanticised idyll of communal living has taken on a life of its own. So much so that it is difficult to find anyone over thirty who does not lament the passing of community or have nostalgic feelings towards times in their lives when they felt that community ‘truly’ existed. This is strikingly similar to Fredric Jameson’s concept of ‘nostalgia for the present’ (1989), where, the same way as we view ‘fifties’ culture as being defined by certain cultural ‘norms’, so we define our present as a set of stylistic and philosophical truths, but then long for it when they do not eventuate. In this way ‘traditional and romantic notions of community
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become a simulacrum, or an “identical copy for which no original has ever existed” (Jameson 1984: 77), of ‘real’ community life.

This chapter will explore the concept of ‘community’ and particularly how Tonnies’ gemeinschaft has influenced its conception. It will argue that by visualising community as homogeneous, static, welcoming, all encompassing and identity giving, it has come to essentially define the opposite of contemporary urban life. As such, the gemeinschaft ideal of community has reduced the concept into a romantic, a utopian vision, but regardless of its unachievable qualities, it has become so reified in the minds of the population that its non-existence has become proof, not of its imagined nature, but of its disappearance. The gemeinschaft conception of community, like other mythical creatures, has vanished, and its absence signals the downfall of good, enriching and healthy social lives.

Gemeinschaft & gesellschaft.

Ferdinand Tonnies’ Gesellschaft und Gesellschaft (1963 [1887]) addressed a number of issues, the first of which was, arguably, to provide a text showing the primacy of the communal and social nature of life, and in doing so, aid the growing socialist movement in Europe (Heberle 1963). The second was to address the formalisation of sociology, or at least the formalisation of certain types of association (Delanty 2003: 33). To this end he made the distinction between gemeinschaft and gesellschaft, the first being a form of sociality generally associated with pre-modern life and second with modern city living. Given that he
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was writing in the shadow of Herbert Spencer, and in the same vein as Marx, this distinction was based firstly on a social evolution perspective (societies developing from simpler to more complex and ‘rational’ models) and secondly on a historical materialism not dissimilar to Marx’s. As a result of these influences, and his predilection for the emerging socialism, his theories lack the complexity of post Spencerian sociology and also have a strong focus on the dialectical nature of social evolution (Delanty 2003: 32). Furthermore, due to the binary nature of his work and his own philosophical preferences, poetic licence was taken to describe the difference between his two types of social life. And though he initially proposed that both gemeinschaft and gesellschaft are inherent parts of every society, and simply a tool to aid in social analysis, his writing voice does not support this. As will be seen below, his preference for earlier, or more social and less contractual, forms of social life was evident, and supports the fact that this text was written, at least in part, to bolster the utopian visions of the growing socialist movement. However, this bias does not discount the power of the text, which has become essential reading for students of community.

The overriding theme of the text is the tension between community and association/society, which gemeinschaft and gesellschaft loosely translate to. But more generally it is about the distinct types of will inherent in the individual; a natural or instrumental will (wessenwille) and a rational, pre-considered, or ends based will (kürwille) (1963: 104-105). These two spirits form distinct types of relations. The first, natural will, produces familial types of relations, relations that
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are about love and respect, enjoyment, art and communal work. In this social relation, authority is derived from, and directly benefits, the community. Work is enjoyable and is seen as an end in itself. Co-operation is necessary and there is harmony between the home, the town and the administrators of the system (1963: 37-64). This is gemeinschaft, or community. It is the older of the two social systems and is consistently defined by Tonnies as the type of social relations we are supposed to have.

In opposition to this is gesellschaft, which is formed from rational, ends achieving, will. This form of sociality is generally described in terms of the structure of capitalism where value is objective, commodity becomes value, ownership is based on contract, competition is universal, all become merchants, and the profit of one means the loss of another. (1963: 64-102). This is closely related to Weber’s “rationalisation” (Ritzer 2000: 131) and Durkheim’s “organic solidarity” (1960), similarly produces its own “iron cage” and “anomie”. In Tonnies words, “here every body is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others” (1963: 65), and at all times “there is a perceived hostility or a latent war” (1963: 77). So while he says that his views of both systems are reasonably balanced, it is quite clear that they are not, a point best summed up by the fact that while there may be a bad gesellschaft, there can never be a bad gemeinschaft, as it goes against the very meaning of the word (1963: 34).
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However, Tonnies was not the first or the last to make this observation. As Sorokin points out, Plato, Confucius, Thomas Aquinas and Hegel, among others, came up with the same conclusions before him (Sorokin 1963), and Durkheim, Weber, Becker and Parsons made similar observations after him (Loomis and McKinny 1963: 13-23). However, no others have had their abstractions called ‘community’ and no others have been so influential in maintaining a very specific vision of what exactly community should be. So regardless of the fact that Tonnies has been considered the perfect synthesis of rationalism and romanticism (Loomis and McKinny 1963: 5), and that his work has been shown to be overly simplified (Delanty 2003: 33), its descriptions and metaphors continue to be brought up as paragons of community life (Bennett 1975). In this regard Tonnies can be considered to be hugely influential in shaping contemporary, popular and taken for granted views of community and what it should appear like.

As per Bauman’s descriptions above, this form of community is all encompassing, friendly, welcoming and warm. It is home and contains friends, family and security. It is always associated with happiness, and is, at the every least, romantic if not mythic. But regardless of its imagined nature, and perhaps in part because of it, this idea of community has achieved incredible status as a symbol of how life should be. So much so that attempts are being made to construct idyllic communities by gating and walling of entire suburbs, and these representations, or simulacra of community have, to the general population and social theorists alike, become representative of community (Soja 1996: 264). What has happened is that
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the conception of what social life should be is actually interfering with what social life is, and in the process has made anything that does not stand up to this perfect vision invalid. Furthermore, not only has this idyll crept into the minds of the general population, but is has also worked its way into social theory. The following examines some ways that this conception of community (as static, welcoming and caring for all) has led to the creation of many late-modern social theories.

The effects of gemeinschaft on social theory

The demise of community

In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam brought the topic of the demise of American community to the world’s attention. Based partly on some of his earlier work regarding civility, reciprocity and wealth (Putnam 1993), the key message of this text was that America was no longer the civil society it once was. Numbers attending interest groups, such as school committees, men’s lodges and political parties have dropped significantly, resulting in a reduction in the “social capital” of the Nation. Here Putnam loosely defines social capital as social networks that we value, civic virtue embedded in a dense social network, and the productive value that social ties have generally (2000: 19). So, for Putnam, social capital can be defined as the connections within society and the benefits, to both the individual and the society that these interlinkages manifest. Evidence of the reduced levels of social capital, or interactivity, was provided in the form of multiple graphs, all of which showed a general reduction in participation across a
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range of social activities. This resulted in negative social trends in child welfare, unsafe neighbourhoods, downturns in economic activity and health, as well as general lack of interest in political affairs. All of these were shown to be reducing the ‘civic’ nature of American society.

Putnam’s argument is quite strong. His statistics show there has been a reduction in specific types of socialising resulting in a decline in communities being generated or maintained. The affect of television, cars, computers and women in labour, he argues, have had a huge effect on the ways in which people socialise, as well as the volume of physical interactions. This message has had widespread effect, making the book a bestseller, and bringing Putnam’s message of social capital and the collapse of community to the forefront of pop social theory (DeFilippis 2001). But in the celebration of this succinct piece of social commentary a number of key issues were ignored, one of which was the type of sociality Putnam was covering.

The title ‘Bowling Alone’ is a reference to bowling clubs and the trend for individuals to no longer be involved with bowling leagues. Putnam uses this as an analogy for the reduced civic virtue he is commenting on, where rather than bowling in leagues, individuals are ‘bowling alone’. But nowhere in the text is there a reference to actually bowling on one’s own or bowling in small groups, only not bowling in *leagues*. A similar theme occurs in his chapters on religion, professional associations, altruism and politics, where he notes sharp downturns
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in formal associations. However, he does not comment on informal, or newer forms of association, such as outside of professional associations, established churches or traditional political causes. So rather than there being a decline in socialising in general, what Putnam was actually documenting was a decline in specific types of socialising, namely older and more traditional, or established activities; a fact evidenced by his three opening examples of a bridge club, a formalised lobby group and a charity league (Putnam 2000: 15). From this perspective is it is quite clear that it was not overall sociality he was observing, but the type of sociality associated with so called ‘civil society’ or traditional community.

His focus was on types of socialising that have been sanctioned as valid tools for the creation of community, or activities that older members of society, the ones that value traditional community, are engaged in. There is validity in activities like scouts and bridge groups that a hedonistic house party, for example, does not have. The first two imply civic membership, but the last is decadent, superfluous and most definitely not associated with community. So it is only traditional activities that contribute to his conception of community as civic, reciprocal and all encompassing, that are relevant. In other words only activities that contribute to gemeinschaft are important. All the indicators that show the demise he talks about are traditional activities that show civic involvement, such as church, sports clubs, parent teacher associations and conversations at meal times. In other words the evidence to support this thesis, of the demise of conservative and traditional
The significance of gemeinschaft types of communities, comes in the form of reduced activity in relatively conservative and traditional types of interaction. There is no reference to pubs or nightclubs, skate parks, exhibitions or taking over old warehouses for the night, but as illustrated by Campbell, (2001), this kind of social activity is actually on the rise.

So the type of community Putnam is interested in documenting is exclusively gemeinschaft, and it is the reduction in this type of community activity that he has based his argument. Rather than saying that community is in decline, what he should have said is that conservative, traditional and nostalgic gemeinschaft community, is in decline. This is the first point, that is the association of community with gemeinschaft is responsible for the ‘demise of community’ arguments. Only activities that produce the type of sociality inherent in gemeinschaft are taken as valid events, and as these forms of sociality become redundant, so it suggests that community is dying.

Narcissism and individualisation

The second example of the power of gemeinschaft can be seen in the recent attention that narcissism and individualism have drawn from a number of social critics. In the Tonnies text there are a number of sections that explicitly point to the fact that community (gemeinschaft) means being with people and that society (gesellschaft) means being alone, or at least isolated by ones individual desires. There is then a dichotomy between individuality and community. In Tonnies terms, it is a bridge that cannot be crossed, and if individualism exists within a
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social system then that automatically negates, or invalidates community. This conception has been carried forward to today, with a number of theorists pointing to an overt individualism and the way that this has ultimately destroyed community, but as we shall see, this is once again based on the overarching assumptions of Tonnies work.

The narcissist is, according to Christopher Lasch, self-absorbed, has delusions of grandeur and cannot live without an admiring audience, but also, due to their self-focus and inability to commit to others, they are also unable to make deep relationships. It is Lasch’s argument that due to the growth of ‘personal development’ this form of narcissistic individuality has become, or is becoming, the norm, resulting in a fractured society of individualists (1979). A parallel argument comes from Giddens, who says due to the pressures of neo-liberalism, and specifically from the lived reality of individuals in late-modernity, a need has arisen for the individual to make their own biographies, or to become “self-reflexive” (1991: 16). This form of individualism is considered to be not so much a freedom, but more of a social rule, where people are forced to be self-determining, and where any failure in society is placed squarely upon the individual. This argument is heavily reinforced by Beck (2002) and Bauman (2001), both of whom paint a bleak picture of a highly individuated contemporary social environment. This environment is one where norms have essentially been removed and the individual is left free-floating in a cultural space filled with
The significance of gemeinschaft consumables, but which is devoid of any depth or meaning, also resulting in a fractured and meaningless society.

However, sociality prevails and people continue to interact. But how does a group of abject individuals come together to form cohesive communities, or rather, how does one develop a commonality amongst strangers, or develop similarity when all are different. Here Bauman points to the type of individualism. Rather than being ‘true’ individualism (or de-facto individualism), what we are actually seeing is an individual de-jure, or a fabricated form of individualism. Essentially the population is being made to feel like individuals, whereas in reality they are all consuming the same products and are therefore essentially the same, just separated by this ideological individualism (2000: 17). Elliot and Lemert explain this similarly, where they argue that rather then achieving real autonomy, what we are currently engaged in is collective narcissism (2006: 60), which results in a form of community. But this is not ‘good’, gemeinschaft community, with the associated high levels of trust and reciprocity that traditional forms of community imply. Bellah et al. call it a ‘lifestyle enclave’ or basically a navel-gazing exercise where all involved recognise their individuality (1985: 73). To Bellah et al. this form of sociality is nothing more than a celebration of each-other’s narcissism, and a group proclamation of greatness based on the social validity of their created selves. Bauman terms these “peg” or “cloakroom” communities; basically loose affiliations of individuals who join popular cultures in the search for some form of common bond, but rather than being satisfied with what they find, they consume
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what they want and then leave, looking for the next cultural turn. The members of these groups are more concerned with the hunt; looking for the next ‘big thing’ to distract them from the horror of mundanity; gorging themselves on celebration of individuality and all the while remaining unfulfilled (2002: 176).

This individualism, be it in the form of narcissism or institutionalised reflexivity, has, according to the above authors, led to a society where ‘real’ community, or, once again, gemeinschaft, cannot possibly occur. Where, through the workings of a society determined on being hyper-individualistic, we have had to cut our ties with traditional roles and mores, essentially removing ourselves from any form of continuity or custom.

The evidence for these perspectives is, however, strangely lacking. While both Elliott and Sennett provide small amounts of interview data and personal vignette, the premise they both base their accounts on seems to come more from poetic sources than objective ones. Consider the quotes below for example:

The consumer’s dream of freedom can all too quickly turn into its opposite, as narcissistic satisfaction turns into a cry of bitter despair (Elliot and Lemert 2006: 38).

One reason for this demeaning superficiality is the disorganisation of time. Time’s arrow is broken, it has no trajectory in a
continually reengineered, routine hating, short-term political economy. People feel the lack of sustained human relations and durable purposes. The people I have so far described have all tried to find the depth of time beneath the surface, if only by registering unease and anxiety about the present (Sennett 1998: 98).

Both use the overarching perspective of dystopianism in order to create a consistent narrative within the text, and both repetitively use sweeping language that implies economic domination, social disorder and personal dissatisfaction. In fact this theme of poetic persuasion can be noticed in all of the work mentioned above, and goes to show the romanticism inherent in late-modern literature. But this is an interesting form of romanticism. Rather than admiring an object, it involves generating a chorus of despair, essentially celebrating (lamenting) the demise of more traditional ways of life, and showing contemporary existence to be lacking in both form and content. From this we can almost see a reverse of gemeinschaft, a romance with the demise of community, where, with the disappearance of ‘good’ sociality we are left with the dystopian and isolating reality of gesellschaft. And regardless of its essentially negative position, the logic that much of this theory adheres to the form of good versus bad, healthy versus unhealthy, old versus new and gemeinschaft versus gesellschaft.

There are three key assumptions that this body of work is based on. The first is that this form of individualism is inherently new; the second is that it is
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overarching and detrimental to societal norms; and the last that it stands in binary opposition to conceptions of community.

The first point can be exposed as incorrect simply by examining the history of individualism. Numerous authors have documented the separation of the individual from their surrounding social structure, or a shifting in social structure to accommodate heightened individualism, such as the specialisation of work practises, changes in culture and adoption of capitalist norms (Durkheim 1960; Lukes 1973; Seidman and Gruber 1977; Elias 1991). This in effect shows that the late modern texts regarding such phenomena, while seemingly valid, could possibly be generating a “moral panic” (Cohen 1987) out of social change; or of making social change into a much larger problem than it really is. The second point is interesting because it proscribes mass-individuation, which sounds oxymoronic, but as Jameson comments “the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” (1984: 76). So on one hand this argues for a segregation of individuals into discrete consuming units of one, but on the other, if individuation truly exists, then to argue for a single social reality is erroneous as there would surely be multiple perspectives and ways of life. Furthermore, if all members of a society are involved in mass-individuation then this must be a social trend in itself, which makes individualism into a new social movement. And this relates to the third point, that community and individuation are not mutually exclusive, it is just that the ‘lifestyle enclaves’ and ‘cloakroom communities’ it produces do not come up
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to the standard of ‘traditional’ communities. So in effect, much of the late modern
type above could be seen to be guilty of the nostalgia trap of mourning a
‘paradise lost’ that Williams warns us of.

This is the second way in which gemeinschaft has affected social theory. By
providing an imagined and nostalgic vision of ‘the good life’, it has generated a
foil against which social theorists can point out overarching individuation and the
degradation of society, which, once reified by other theorists, becomes a reality.
However, what it really is, is a mirror image of gemeinschaft and is therefore
potentially just as flawed.

**Speed of social change**

The next, or third, argument showing the influence of gemeinschaft, concerns the
proposal that society is now changing so quickly that it could not possibly support
something as static as a community. As mentioned, central to late modern
theorists is the premise that individuals must create their own identity and
biography (Giddens 1991: 16). The assumption is that previously identity was
ascribed, and now, due to the breakdown of macro structures, such as community
and religion, this is no longer the case. In line with Lash and Urry’s thesis on the
increasing speed of capital and the resulting emptying out of the symbols used for
identity creation (1987; 1994), what is occurring is that, as money markets and
investment speed up, so too do social and cultural movements. This fast rate of
cultural change has been noted by author such as Virilio (2005) and Redhead
(1990), who showed how the speed of information has led to ever faster cycles of
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popular culture, resulting in pop culture and identity making symbols moving so fast as to effectively destroy any form of solidity. This, according to Sennett, is resulting in an ‘across-the-board’ Corrosion of Character (1998; 2006) leaving individuals without solid identities or definitions of group belonging. Effectively, the speeding up of capital leads to a market that cannot work in a static environment, resulting in the necessary breakdown of long-term structures such as community.

According to this thesis, it is the speed of social change and the accompanying lack of long term identities that accompany it, that are the cause of the societal malaise and mass-anomie (apparently) prevalent in society. However, this line of argument is based on two presumptions. The first is that society has, until recently, been static, and the second is that the removal of a static environment has produced an anomic and dysfunctional individual.

The first point, the assumption that communities have to be static, does not equate with documented social realities. Given the nature of gemeinschaft, and the theoretical foundations upon which the concept of community is based, ethnographers and anthropologists will bracket communities as static. However, all communities, from Athens (Sennett 1994) to Chicago (Foote Whyte 1943), from rural villages in Ireland (McFarlane 1986) to Australia (Middleton 1978) have been shown to have some form of dynamism about them. Sennett particularly shows that a reduction in dissent, or his case dynamism, leads to
The significance of gemeinschaft stagnation, which reduces the vibrancy and functionality of the community (1970: 41-49). So to a large extent, community actually needs change, and when longitudinal studies are taken into account this can be plainly seen (Barrett, Oropesa et al. 1984). And while communities have been shown to not necessarily be static, these dynamic social forms have not been shown to produce overly high levels of dysfunctional individuals. So with regard to the fracturing of contemporary culture and the assumed resultant fractured identity, locality and community can still produce cohesive cultural identities, regardless of the outward lack of coherent cultural form (Bennett 2000: 104).

It seems that once again the power of gemeinschaft, as a singular, overarching and identity giving form, has corrupted some central ideas regarding contemporary sociality. The argument showing society to be speeding up and therefore not providing the time for individuals to develop long-term identities, is inherently based on the assumption that this form of change is new, and particular exclusively to the present, which, when considered in light of any feudal period of history, is plainly not the case. And while we be may be open to the vagaries of a fast changing global market in pop culture and identity, this does not preclude the possibility for common sociality or community living. What it does preclude is a form of life where all are simultaneously engaged in long-term, ascribed and heterogeneous biographies. What we are seeing then is yet another way in which a romantic notion of how life should be is aiding in the construction of a negative and generally dystopian perspective on contemporary social and personal life. The
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Final point regarding gemeinschaft is linked to the above, but rather than examining the individual and the community, it examines the state of public space and its ability, or inability, to create community.

The death of public space

There are multiple texts that examine the changing nature of public space (Oldenburg 1989: 270; Sennett 1994; Zukin 1995), each of which examines the way in which space has undergone a change from being that which is lived in to that which is managed and moved through. And rather than public space existing for the populus to socialise in, it has become a space to both govern and escape from. This has become such a social reality that Sennett proposes avoidance of public space as a new form of affluence (1994: 256).

The reasons for this shift in understandings of public space are partly due to a culture of management and partly to fear mongering. Space is either to be accounted for by some agency, and must therefore be orderly and efficient, or has become, through media sensationalisation, something that could potentially harm and which should be avoided (Zukin 1995: 28). But regardless of cause, the significant factor is that individuals are either moving through, or not using, public space; evidence of which can be found in the empty parks and business corridors throughout most western cities and suburbs.

A second point on the death of public space comes from the over commercialisation of both private and public space. To Van Dijk the privatisation
The significance of gemeinschaft of the public sphere has had a large impact in producing a lack of social contact. Surfing the net and engaging in private, singular function communities, has had the result of limiting who one can meet and essentially privatising one’s social habits, removing the necessity to share any of this with others, or to use the public sphere at all (1999). Bauman presents the mirror image of this, where the private has been colonised by the public; people are more interested in the private life of celebrities and faraway events than their own, thus generating a lack of interest in the immediate locale and local community (2001: 42). To elaborate further, both Giddens and Castells suggest that as communications change and speed up, locality is increasingly irrelevant, giving way to a space of ‘flows’ rather than a space of place (Castells 1996), where everything flows in channels from nexus to nexus, with the places in between left to decay.

The result of this is a vision of public space that is either unused or so sanitised that it is only good for commercial ventures. And if there are people in public then they have generally been, to use Zukin’s term, “pacified by cappuccino” (1995: 28); forced to enjoy middle class affluence or vacate the area. So if public space is used, it is either used to make money or to perform a socially sanctioned routine. If we are to take this at face value, then the outlook for community is not good, as how could something like community exist when everyone exists in their own personal social spaces?
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According to Sennett, the contemporary focus upon the individual as being distinct from society, along with the narcissism that individualism implies, has led to an increase in individuals needing to prove that they are ‘authentic’, or rather, that who they pretend to be in public is actually who they are: a fact also supported by Lash and Lury (2007: 141). This push for correct representation, he says, is vastly different from the previous two centuries. In the 18th and 19th century there was a shift in the conception of public space; from a mundane, utilitarian and everyday, to a more spectacular and ‘civilised’, or progressive, notion of it. With the building of promenades, malls and public gardens came the invention of an exterior, or social, identity, which was vastly different from the private one. One’s public identity was based on public codes, where individuals could recognise the social position of others without having to know them (Sennett 1974: 72). In other words, it was a protocol for interacting with strangers without actually having to meet them. In the dress and actions of the other, one could see the social makeup of the entire society, or rather, through people following the system of self-categorisation the idea of the stranger was removed for public life. These public faces were far from authentic; they were created through the actions of multiple social systems, and were quite stereotypical. The example Sennett uses is the nineteenth century habit of promenading, where strict dress codes and conversational norms were employed to distinguish members of different classes.
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This is apparently not the case with contemporary publics. Where, due to the breakdown of overarching group norms and the growth of individualised identity creation, the contemporary individual is now out to publicly show that their public persona is ‘real’ and ‘authentic’. This has, according to Sennett had a number of effects on public space. Firstly, the huge number of individualised personalities on public display has led to an erosion of social types, essentially removing any possibility of recognising peoples’ class or community background in public. This is similar to Van-Dijk’s comments on the obsolete nature of public space, where, as there are now so many ‘types’ of people, the very concept of a singular ‘public’ has become outmoded (1999: 170). Public space was designed on the assumption that people could become a singular ‘public’ but in an urban environment, with numerous divisions and subcultures (Hannerz 1980) this cannot be the case.

Secondly, the over bureaucratisation of space has made it impossible for such a diverse range of people to effectively use it. In other words, with the increase in management of public space and the restrictions placed upon it, the chances of it being used by anyone at all is quite low. Oldenburg shows this to be the case where he observed a completely functioning youth centre collapse due too its over-regulation (Oldenburg 1989: 270).

The final point is the decline of the public personality, or the loss of truly social, gregarious, and essentially carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984) self. Where, rather than focusing on brief social interaction based on stereotypical public roles, individuals are instead representing their ‘true’ selves. Authenticity has become so important
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in social interaction that individuals have lost their ability to socialise. Instead they are more concerned about the validity of their self-image and are continuously trying to show that they are who they say they are, and are not ‘inauthentic’. In Goffman’s terms this equates to a ‘belief in the role one is playing’ and the correct representation of that role. However, this, according to Sennett, is not what being out in public is supposed to entail. The public sphere is supposed to be stereotyped and inauthentic; it is more concerned with interacting with strangers than close friends, and requires innumerable social operations so as to prevent any ‘deep’ form of social interaction, or interaction that will lead to high levels of reciprocity, from occurring. The term ‘out in public’ therefore, carries with it certain obligations towards superficiality. Our conversation must remain light and our clothes represent something that is recognisable to others. They must be able to ‘pigeonhole’ us, and based on the image that they form they will then know what to talk about. In urban environments, this form of creating a generalised other is necessary, otherwise social interaction will become too complex and not occur (Sennett 1974: 137-147).

Through his views on urban sociality, Sennett is showing us that the lack of authenticity, or solidity, in contemporary communities need not worry us, the opposite is in fact the problem; we have become too concerned with having ‘real’ conversations in public space, which cannot happen. As a consequence of these lofty expectations we are no longer happy with outwardly pointless conversation, which is resulting in a reduction in social opportunities. This lack of socialising,
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as well as a concern with having *depth* in our social relationships has taken us away from a strong impersonal culture and made us romanticise a form of community where we are surrounded by like-minded people. This point is made very clearly below, where Sennett examines the nature of perceptions of the city, the way that it is flawed and the necessity of ‘inauthentic’ communication.

Cities appear in the present day clichés, as the ultimate in empty impersonality. In fact the lack of a strong, impersonal culture in the modern city has instead aroused a passion for fantasised intimate disclosure between people. Myths of an absence of community, like those of the soullessness of the vicious crowd, serve the function of goading men to seek out community in terms of a common self. The more the myth of empty impersonality, in particular forms, becomes the common sense of society, the more will that populace feel morally justified in destroying the essence of urbanity, which is that men can act together, without the compulsion to be the same (Sennett 1974: 255).

What Sennett is saying here is that cities are called shallow and empty places and that this image has become reified. Individuals feel lonely in cities and then go looking for community to replace their loneliness by having a group of similar people around them. But cities were not designed for this, the city creates a space where people can work together and *not* be similar. The public nature of the city
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was supposed to guarantee that while people were different, they could still create a civil society, or at least communicate; no matter how shallow. In fact the shallow, or prescribed, nature of these conversations are actually what made the whole system work. When people started to lose their public skills in favour of ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ representations of themselves, the system of ‘being in public’ suffered, and to an extent got replaced by concepts such as ‘community’. But if there were a stronger impersonal community, an idea foreign to that of gemeinschaft, then people would not seek the imaginary refuge of romanticised community. If society saw the community that was actually in front of them, that is, the impersonal, diverse, open and public community, as opposed to a closed and homogeneous community, then gemeinschaft conceptions of common social life would not be necessary, as individuals would be actively engaged in public life.

This is quite a shift in thinking about public life, where the inauthentic comes to replace the authentic, and from this perspective the imagined ideal of gemeinschaft community could be viewed quite negatively. By holding on to idyllic conceptions of how life should be, we could be ignoring and essentially doing away with any ‘real’, or active community that is actually operating around us. In this instance community could almost be viewed as an ideal, and not just an aspiration, but an ideal that actually prevents the reality of the lived community from becoming evident.
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**Conclusion.**

To conclude, the key theme of this chapter was to show the power of gemeinschaft and some of its effects. This concept has, to a large degree, become reified amongst social theorists, resulting in bodies of work that are, in some form, mourning its demise. From ‘bowling alone’ to narcissism and from rapid social change to the demise of public space, all are in some way linked to the notion of a ‘golden age’. As such they show how a contrived notion can take control of a field of knowledge and, on the basis of it becoming reified, produce observations that are quite polarised. But the object of the chapter was not to show that the above theories pertaining to contemporary sociality were wrong. Partly, it was to temper late-modern theories with the knowledge that they are, to an extent, based on a romantic notion. Gemeinschaft is a binary term, with its opposite being gesellschaft, as such, when gemeinschaft is invoked it creates a dualism, that of community versus individual isolation, and healthy versus unhealthy. And when the ‘healthy’ community disappears, then the unhealthy emerges, as can be seen by the focus on dytopianism above. So rather than suggest that these theories are incorrect, instead it is argued that they should be reconsidered from the perspective of contemporary ethnographic research that considers the overriding nature of gemeinschaft and community.

This chapter begins to open up the discourse of what community is, what it is not and what it could be, and to provide the reader with an insight into the power of gemeinschaft and how it can limit or warp theoretical perspectives. The next
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chapter will begin to reconsider community from historical ethnographic examples and show that far from being singular, static and welcoming, it is dynamic, plural and often violent. There will also be a discussion and a re-interpretation of some late-modern theories presented above, which will show how these perspectives, removed of their overarching binarism, can be of tremendous benefit in defining community today.
Chapter 4: Community without gemeinschaft

Introduction

The concept of community is a contested one. From the last chapter we can see that there is a particularly powerful nostalgic perspective interwoven into the term. This automatic association of community with gemeinschaft has produced a model of communal living that is inherently idyllic and, to a degree, imagined, resulting in a wide range of contentious issues regarding the contemporary state of social life. But aside from this romantic perspective there are numerous other positions. The functional aspect sees community, or rather the communal association that networks of social capital produce, as generating resources. This ‘civic’ model proposes that interaction in civil institutions generates ‘assets’ that are usable by the general public. This is essentially Robert Putnam’s model, where legitimised social interaction becomes a means to an end and can have positive as well as anti-social results (2000: 21-22).

Resistance is another perspective on community. From this vantage point individuals become united in opposition to a dominant ideal, such as an overarching globalism or a hegemonic culture (Castells 1997), developing a commonality due more to transgressing the norms of society than adhering to a common theme (Stallybrass and White 1986). This can, as in Castells’ case, be functional by providing an alternative identity template and maintaining local cultural norms, or, as in the case of Stallybrass and White, become a marker of
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that which is celebratory, life affirming and whatever is not bourgeois. As such it is not civil, but rather stands in opposition to dominant understandings of civility.

This is just one dimension that polarises conceptions of community, but there are many others, such as the long or short-term nature of community (Warner and Lunt 1941), the partial or whole community (Bensman and Vidich 1958) and more recently the individualised (Wellman 1979) or partial (Savage, Bagnall et al. 2005) nature of community. In fact the issues surrounding the concept of community are so numerous that Hillary noted some 94 different conceptions of the term, covering an array of identifiers that included social groups, consciousness, institutions, individuality, kinship, sufficiency, social systems, integration, geographic area and common possessions, among others (1955). With this much variance over definitions, especially when the romance of gemeinschaft notions of community are added, there is obviously going to be confusion over what exactly community is.

This chapter will generate a working model of community that stands in contrast to many ideas discussed previously. This will be done, not by absolutely defining what community is, but by starting to explore alternative perceptions of it; to work outside of earlier presumptions and to show what community could possibly be. Starting with Foote-Whyte’s analysis of Chicago slums in the 1920’s and ending with Savage’s contemporary analysis on the affects of globalisation in Northern England, this chapter will examine a wide range of community studies,
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all of which will focus on particular aspects of communal life. In total five aspects of community will receive attention, namely: the dynamic and permanently changing nature of community; how external factors go to create and label communities; how communities manufacture their own internal logic; how socio-cultural mechanisms are utilised to create hierarchies both within and external to communities; and how contemporary communities are elective and, to a large degree, imagined. Once again, this is not to show that communities are intrinsically ‘good’ or ‘bad’ places, but to highlight the fact that they come in many forms, most of which are not identifiable as gemeinschaft.

Community as dynamic, diverse and multiple

In Foote Whyte’s urban ethnographic classic, Street Corner Society (1943), we are shown both the macro and micro elements of social structure that go towards generating a ‘slum’. The evolving group hierarchies, the changing affiliations of group members and the movement of individuals, both into and out of ‘Cornerville’, highlight the dynamic and perpetually shifting nature of the community. The macro aspects involve the racketeering and political manoeuvring that go towards generating the political atmosphere of the area, while the micro aspects of the study examine the social habits of two small groups of men; the ‘corner boys’ and the ‘college boys’. These are two essentially oppositional ‘gangs’ that frequent the slum and are used to represent dual and dialectical aspects of slum living, as in the below quote:
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Both the college boy and the corner boy want to get ahead. The difference between them is that the college boy either does not tie himself to a group of close friends or is willing to sacrifice his friendship with those who do not advance as fast as he does. The corner boy is tied to his group by a network of reciprocal obligations from which he is either unwilling or unable to break away (1943: 107).

The first group then is showing the tension between community and individuality, whereas the second attempts to capture the mundane elements of reciprocal community life.

The overriding emphasis of this study examines the internal functioning of the Chicago Italian slum community, which was deemed chaotic and lawless by those outside of it (Foote Whyte 1943: xv). After analysing the communities in the area he shows that rather than its social dysfunction coming from a lack of societal norms, it is actually just a perceived lack of social order, resulting from being a different cultural system to the external (White American) cultural system. As he says: “Cornerville’s problem is not a lack of organisation, but a failure of its own social organisation to mesh with the structure of the society around it” (1943: 273). It is this that becomes the overriding feature of the study, to point out the structured nature of any community, regardless of society’s perception of it. As such, any community, regardless of the opinion of those external to it, can be
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shown to have organisation and to therefore be a form of social structure worthy of consideration.

Given that solidity and form were the emphasis of the study, there is an obvious lack of focus on the *dynamic* nature of what he was observing. For example, his first study group, the corner boys, go through a number of changes in their structure and activities. Starting as a solid group with consistent membership and a singular leader, they continually change leadership and structure, ultimately disbanding as members moved on to other groups; as can be seen from the excerpts below:

The Nortons were Doc’s gang. The group was brought together primarily by Doc and it was built around Doc (1943: 3). When Doc first met him, Angelo was exceedingly shy and had no friends (1943: 11). When the group split in two, Doc, Danny and Mike could no longer keep the followers in their places. Nutzy had a chance to seize the leadership among his group of bowlers (1943: 47). Its Angelo that’s holding that clique together now. If he went away for a month they would break up … When Angelo’s power in the club was destroyed, he also lost his hold upon the corner. There was no longer a leader to hold the boys together, and the last remnants of Doc’s gang disappeared from Norton Street (1943: 51).
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What is interesting about this series of quotes is that these people were purported to be representative of individuals trapped in relationships of obligation from which they could not leave. As such one would assume that they were more likely to be the mainstay of the community, and therefore, if traditional conceptions of community were correct, to be in static, long term relationships with their peers. But as can be seen above, this was hardly the case.

A similar situation occurred with the ‘college boys’. This was a collection of individuals who were educated to college level, and in an attempt to move from lower to middle class lifestyles they formed a club that was committed to popularising Italian culture, both inside and outside of the locale (1943: 79). Foote Whyte presents them as distinct from ‘corner boys’ in that they feel as though they can achieve more than the locale or their local culture allows them. They are essentially attempting to gain middle class status. However, the tension between group members over the clubs direction ends up destroying their organisation, generating an array of loyalties and factions that inevitably formed other groups, cliques and clubs (1943: 85).

When the strain between the individuals within the group is taken with the above-mentioned tension, these individuals have between their personal
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interests and that of the community, it becomes clear that the idea of a
singular, holistic and homogenous ‘community’ is far from reality. Even in
this study, with its focus on showing definite social structure, the
fragmentary and temporary associations that are not typically associated
with community become evident as normal aspects of communal living.
Given that the purpose of describing these groups was to show the inner
workings of the community, we can see that while there is most definitely a
social schema in operation, it is one that is based on fluidity between its
members and the changing nature of relationships and allegiances.

It seems that rather than there being a singular and overarching community at
large, what was actually occurring was a dense, transient and poly-themic
sociality occurring in a distinct geographical location. Producing what Delanty
(2003: 35) called the “meta-narrative of community”, or the general acceptance of
overlaying cultural and symbolic norms within the area. To a large extent, it
appears that the ‘community’ came to be known, not from inside the area, but
actually from outside. This is apparent from Foote Whyte’s introductory
comments, where he shows the way in which his study area was defined by the
media reports of it.

One may enter Cornerville already equipped with newspaper
information upon some of its racketeers and politicians, but the
newspaper presents a very specialised picture. If a racketeer
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commits murder, that’s news. If he proceeds quietly with the daily
routines of his business, that is not news. If the politician is
indicted for accepting graft, that is news. If he goes about doing the
usual personal favours for his constituents that is not news. The
newspaper concentrates on the crisis (1943 xvi).

So to the general public, or those outside of the Cornerville, the area has, through
media reports, become associated with racketeering, murder, indictment and other
anti-social behaviour, and as such has been labelled as a singular community. It is
not my intention to note the dysfunctional aspect of all this, what is relevant here
is the imagining of the area as one community, or the labelling of all within the
area as the same as a single group. And from the very small sample discussed by
Foote Whyte, it is clear that this is not the case.

The individuals involved in this ‘community’ are quite diverse and their relations
plural and fluid. Furthermore, relationships were based on high levels of conflict,
not just reciprocity, which go to produce a very dynamic model of community,
and it is this that is the first point. Community is not static; it is quite dynamic and
is consistently changing. It is a process (Delanty 2003: 27) not a destination. It
can never be fully achieved as it is always in flux. However, regardless of how
this defines the situation within the community, to those outside, the community
appears to be fully formed and complete.
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Community as labelled from outside

As Bauman says “love would not recognise itself in words” (2001: 163). This means that to describe love would not only not do it justice, but words are incapable of defining or describing it. A similar point could be made for community. As pointed out in the methodology chapter, ethnographic accounts of communities are at best “partial truths” (Clifford 1986); elaborate constructions made up of what we see passed through a filter of theoretical perspectives. As such words can never, fully, represent the community. To take this a step further, would the community recognise itself in a review or would individuals even acknowledge that they were a community? James Spradley’s *You Owe Yourself A Drunk* (1970) is here used as an example to illustrate the external defining of a community.

The text broadly examines the nature of public transient drunks in America and their treatment by both the authorities and the general public. More specifically it examines the effect of public labelling upon this population and how, through their acceptance of the roles placed on them, these individuals come to comply with the public’s perceptions of them (1970: 95). By way of introductory evidence, Spradley provides one year’s worth of correspondence, or forty letters, from a regularly jailed transient man. In these letters we see evidence of an educated, articulate and empowered writer, determined to prove his innocence to the authorities, so much so that he attempts to sue the city of Seattle on the grounds of cruel and unusual punishment (1970: 25). However, throughout the
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year we see the gradual disintegration of his character as he slowly succumbs to the institutional perspective of him as a ‘bum’, resulting in a diminished and shattered identity (1970: 67).

Though many individuals end up becoming institutionalised, and therefore homogenous in the eyes of the authorities, where they originate from, as well as their aims and perspectives on life all differ. In fact, so distinct are the members of the subculture that Spradley notes fifteen different ‘types’ of tramp and forty types of bed, not to mention numerous other categories and taxonomies that individuals created distinctions around. In essence, the stereotypical perspective of these individuals as a singular community is quite erroneous, and to a large degree actually responsible for generating the problem of public vagrancy. It is as though these individuals have had ‘community’ cast upon them. Rather than being seen as individuals they have, as per the residents of Cornerville, had the stereotypical descriptors reserved for entities that are ‘known’ placed upon them. As Spradley says:

Studies of this minority group based on these models [of homeless people as vagrants, drunks, failures etc.] may not define this subculture at all. Instead they may describe how members of the larger American society define this minority group, and, as such, they are descriptions of the dominant American culture (1970: 68)
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In this way the labelling of those outside of a culture becomes a way to ‘know’ them or a way to describe and define them, to place them into a category. But the category is not of their creation; it is created by those doing the categorising and to a large extent manufactured around the labellers’ assumptions of the other culture. So rather than community being a ‘natural’ or internal function, in this regard, it seems to be more similar to both Simmel’s conception of The Stranger (1950c) and Said’s Orientalism (1985), in that through ‘naming’ a group as distinct, it allows for a generalised other to be created.

By manufacturing and labelling a group as a community, so the dominant group can come to ‘know’ them. (Simmel 1950c: 408). There is a tension between the known and the unknown, where, rather than having unnamed strangers, communities of ‘others’ will be named and so become ‘types’ that are known. But it is not a ‘true’ knowing, it is a knowing based on what is not common between the two groups and to a large degree it is this distinction and labelling of ‘the other’ that is actually the community. Until institutionalised, tramps do not see themselves as ‘bums’ (Spradley 1970: 182), Cornerville residents do not see themselves as racketeers (Foote Whyte 1943: 56), and to use a more contemporary example, punks do not see themselves as punks (Muggleton 2000: 145). Rather, those outside of these cultures, be they segregated individuals, the media or sociologists, label and therefore create community. And it is this that is the second point regarding community, that it is essentially constructed from the outside.
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That the groups we seek to investigate, label and categorise are, to a large degree, manufactured. This creates an immovable irony for the thesis, as it shows how attempts to define communities are intrinsically flawed, but as will be seen in chapter seven, by approaching community as partial and plural a more realistic interpretation can be achieved.

Community as both imagined and real

As the subtitle of the text indicates, the main point of Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labour* (1977), was to show “how working class kids get working class jobs”. Covering three years of research, this text explored the lives of a small group of boys during the last two years of high school and their first year in the work force. Throughout the years in school they continually disrupted class, laughed at teachers and made reference to both their own superiority as well as the lowly position of those who were willing subordinates of the education system. This was done, according to Willis, to “win both symbolic and physical space from the institution and its rules” (1977: 26). Outside of school they engaged in sexist and racist rhetoric that both preserved the ‘masculine and aggressive’ culture of their surroundings as well as qualifying them locally as ‘hard men’. The effect of which was to institutionalise them into their ‘class culture’, or make them ready for working on the factory floor. But rather than accept this fate quietly, they instead manufactured a culture of emancipation that allowed for individual empowerment and the apparent *election* of this bleak future.
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Though it is usually misrecognised, one of the things that keeps the capitalist system stable, and is one of its complex wonders, is that an important section of the subordinate class do not accept the proffered reality of the steady diminution of their own capacities. Instead they reverse the valuation of the mental/manual gradient by which they are measured. The lads’ under study here, prefer (for the moment), and affirm themselves through, manual labour. This, of course, provides the missing link for the social chain of class distinctions. All other classes above this can celebrate, justify and see a comparative base for their own superiority in the mental mode in the currency of the dominant ideology (1977: 148).

This perspective on the social nature of capitalism shows us how, though essentially constructed by the dominant culture, a group went about manufacturing its own logic in order to preserve the dignity of its participants, but it also shows how the logic of the community went towards reproducing the greater social order (1977: 151). So from one perspective we can see, once again, the institutionalised construction of community from external sources, but from another we can see how the named community recasts itself and its culture so as to celebrate itself, though, in this case, only just long enough to get its participants through the factory doors (1977: 107).
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A far less political, but equally enlightening perspective on cultural norms, is provided in Willis’ earlier work on motorbike and hippy cultures. In *Profane Cultures* we similarly see how cultural logics are enacted and maintained to create distinction between members of the same urban landscape. For the bikers the focus was on maintaining an ‘absolute’ identity (1978: 18) and empowerment came in the form of personally electing this form of identity, as well as the cultural symbols that accompanied it (1978: 12). The hippies on the other hand elected a more fluid identity template, essentially attempting to distance themselves from a singular style, focusing on the primacy of the individual and an ‘authentic’ expression of the self (1978: 89). Both of these cultures were elective and both used an array of symbols to denote membership and cultural function. Examples are the use of motorbikes, shirts, scarves, and musical styles, all of which denoted specific meaning *within* the culture, but had little meaning outside of it. As with the heavy metal bands of the 1980’s and their use of pink tights, long blond hair and high voices to signify masculinity, so the cultural logic of these and other groups made little sense external to its own culture. Though quite separate, both of these communities show, once again, the manufactured nature of community or subcultural logic. Rather than their cultural perceptions being anything inherently ‘natural’ or a priori, they were instead an internally validated system that was, as least partly, a reaction to the surrounding social structure. But regardless of its manufactured nature it was still quite effective in terms of generating group cohesion and developing community.
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**Community as conflict**

The fourth aspect of community to be examined has been hinted at numerous times above and it is how communities are not always in concord, but are more often in a state of conflict. It has been observed in the factions that developed in Cornerville, the changing of allegiances within the community and the existence of Cornerville in the first place. It can be seen in the creation of the generalised other; where categories of difference are maintained by the dominant culture. It has been documented in the maintenance of class cultures and the valorisation of distinct and divergent aspects of everyday life. And it has been noted in the deliberate segregation of youth cultures into separate and distinct subcultures. The hierarchical and divisive nature of community is evident but often ignored. By way of formalising its significance, one of the most formative texts regarding this perspective of community will be considered.

The introduction to Elias and Scotson’s *The Established and the Outsiders* (1994), possibly the most poignant introduction to a sociology text, paints a bleak picture of community. In it they show, through the creation of in and out groups, how collective fantasies of superiority are fashioned, how one group rises above another, how dominance is achieved over the group that is labelled as inferior, and how the group labelled as inferior internalises this role.

The study group from which the information was gathered was Winston-Parva, a rural town in the English Midlands a new suburb that was built to accommodate...
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the influx of factory workers to the area. The foundations of the research, which was Scotson’s investigation into the disruptive behaviour of students from this new area, blossomed into a full-scale review of the social infrastructure of the entire community. From the information gathered they were able to surmise that is was not financial affluence that was causing the discrepancy in attitudes between children from different suburbs, but rather the labels being placed on both the children and parents in the new area by members of the established townsfolk.

In Winston-Parva there was the full armoury of group superiority and group contempt … Exclusion and stigmatisation of the outsiders by the established group were thus powerful weapons used by the latter to maintain their identity, to assert their superiority, keeping others firmly in their place” (1994: xviii).

Through blame and praise gossip, they started to place the worst qualities, or the opposite of whatever values they held to be good, onto the newcomers, and simultaneously praised themselves for being above, or better than these new arrivals. How they were able to do this, without much recourse from the outsider group, lay in the fact that there were high levels of integration and social capital in the more established group, which led to a recognised and well-known set of group norms. Given that there was little interaction or integration into any unifying core values in the new area, the new inhabitants had little in the way of a defence against the barrage of constantly reinforced negative comments (1994:
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Put more simply, the established group had the social networks and the resultant societal norms necessary to create a cohesive social formation, or community. Whereas the newcomers, as they did not socialise with each other, were unable to produce a matching set of rules and customs. As a result of this, the established group developed social dominance of the area, which they used to denigrate the newcomers, thus elevating themselves.

This ‘established-outsider’ configuration, and resultant collective fantasy of the established group as superior, led to negative reactions from the new group; such as defiant and rebellious attitudes coming from the outsider school children, which the established group took as further signs of inferiority. In this way, the older group, though praise-gossip, blame-gossip, as well as negative labelling, managed to maintain their sense of superiority in the area and also, through controlling the social capital of the area, managed to keep the new people out of local positions of influence.

The implications of this were that the outsider group was excluded, but an important point is that they were still part of the system of hierarchy. If the outsider group had not been there, there would have been no one over which the established could have defined their superiority. However, and this is arguably the key point of the text, if the outsiders had not been there to elevate the established group, then some other group would have taken its place. In other words, those in positions of social power (as well as those without it), create, or subvert, common
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myths to keep themselves elevated, regardless of the culture surrounding them. So the labels that one group places on another, and the divisions and distinctions of social or cultural class they utilise, are nothing more than a symbolic ordering of ‘us versus them’. But if all involved believe these labels to be true, then the collective fantasy becomes a social fact, or as Elias says:

Give a group a bad name and they are likely to live up to it … this is part of the mounting evidence that goes to show that growing up as a member of a stigmatised outsider group can result in specific intellectual as well as emotional deficiencies (1994: xxix).

This, once again, reinforces the institutionalised nature of named and labelled communities, but also shows the way in which the entire schema of community relations can be utilised to allow groups to label other groups, segregate themselves and then dominate the other group.

This is the fourth point regarding community; that in opposition to the overtly positive view of communal life as warm and welcoming, it can actually be a site of intense conflict, division, manipulation and oppression. This perception of community, as both the cause and the product of hierarchy and distinction, is inherently ‘darker’ than that of the rural idyll and the wholesome social environment. In this case social relations were used to dominate and exclude, and
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while the established had the freedom to come and go within the good community, the outsiders had no choice but to be part of the bad community.

**Community as highly individualised and fluid**

This final point deals with the nature of contemporary urban community. It examines the way in which community is both multiple and elective, and also how it is re-imagined depending on the cultural makeup of the area and the perception of the individuals within it.

Savage et al’s *Globalisation and Belonging* examined how the residents of four suburbs of Manchester felt about where they lived, where they belonged, and how they went about creating a meaningful framework out of the space around them.

The introduction begins with a number of assertions. Firstly, locale has not been consumed by the global: localities are still significant in the individual processing of culture and greatly aid in the construction of individuals’ sense of self. Secondly, a place can have many meanings, almost as many as there are individuals within it. So rather then community and locale being seen as singular monolithic concepts, they are actually multiple and diverse. And thirdly, that individuals change how they view a locale to both generate commonality amongst their neighbours and to suit their individual life histories, cultures and needs; a point also supported by Bourdieu regarding the congruous nature of habitus and field (Bourdieu 1999). As such, the text shows the plural and imagined nature of community, but more importantly goes to illustrate the highly individualised, or ‘elective’ nature of contemporary urban community.
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“Elective belonging” is the term Savage et al. use for a level of commitment that is not absolute or even essential for community membership. Tied in with this are conceptions of both community and individuality that are not mutually exclusive, where the individual can elect what community they wish to join and to what degree. This conceptualising of community is particularly important in that it allows for a more permeable barrier between communities and also creates a more open style of community, allowing for many individuals to come and go as they wish. Another important aspect of this way of looking at belonging is that it also opens up the community to multiple interpretations of it. So if Savage et al.’s understanding of belonging, as that which is founded on the importance of a place to an individual, is true, then this idea of elective belonging opens up the concept of what the community means to a far more individualised interpretation.

This ties in with Barry Wellman’s perspective of community, where, rather than communities being singular and overarching, they are actually the combination of many ‘personal networks’, and it is the interactions between the personal networks that defines the community (Wellman 1988). What these observations do is to open the concept of community up so as not to stand in direct opposition to individuality, but show how autonomy can exist simultaneously with common culture and community norms.
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The other important observation by Savage et al. was that of how locality is constructed. One finding was that migrants were more involved in actively creating locality than locals, as they have to construct it anew for themselves. However, the ability of this vision to transcend the popular and established view is dependant on the strength of the existing social hierarchy, as described by Elias, above. But regardless of group perspectives on place, the research found that people did not actually create a separate and distinct image of their locale. What they actually did was to create a composite of their locality based on other places they had been (Savage, Bagnall et al. 2005: 103). So to a large extent, people actually had quite differing visions of place, which one would assume would generate a very fractured social environment, but when combined with the fluidity of community that elective belonging creates, this turned from a problem to a benefit. Instead of a single set of ideals defining the meaning of place, there were now many, which, when combined with the variance, transience and elective nature of local communities, allowed the area to accommodate individualists, communitarians and those in between, as well as the many differing perspectives that made up the locale.

This piece of research identified a number of areas where popular theories on the spread of globalisation and the demise of locality are challenged. Firstly, they showed how locality is not only still alive, but is one of the key cultural tools used by individuals to make sense of their world. Secondly, they illustrated that locality is not a defence against globalism, but something that allows individuals to
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manipulate global culture and make it personally useful. Thirdly, that there is little in the way of a dichotomy between localism and globalism. As the majority of individuals now travel, displacement and migration have become reasonably commonplace, even amongst the most parochial of locales. And fourthly, that there is little in the way of a division between cosmopolitanism and localism, as both are key aspects of any urban centre.

Essentially this research focused on breaking down the assumed dichotomous relationships between old and new, global and local, the stationary and the transient, and between gemeinschaft and gesellschaft. In terms of community, it showed that rather than community being absolute, overarching and domineering, it is actually based on both convenience and individuals personally electing where they want to belong.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to show how communities are quite different from the simplified and romanticised concept of gemeinschaft. Firstly, communities are dynamic; they form for a period of time or for a set function that changes in accordance with internal and external pressures, and they frequently involve infighting or conflict to establish leadership, dominance or common mores. The case in point here was the way in which the small groups in the Chicago slums changed frequently as the interests of those in the community, and the opinion of the community by the outside world, changed.
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The second point was that the labelling of community groups is, at least partly, created by those outside of the community. On a macro level, this has the effect of manufacturing an imagined homogeneity within a group, when there is actually little similarity, and even animosity, between individuals. The result of this is a stereotyping activity that leads to misconceptions by both the general public as well as social researchers; where rather than looking at sociality in general, we look at bracketed and illusory distinctions based on constructed labels of community. On an individual level, the effects of this are evident, particularly in the case of Spradley’s ‘bums’ or Becker’s jazz musicians (1963). In both of these instances the labelled individuals came to adopt the institutionalised perspective of themselves; essentially taking on the role of the miscreant and either celebrating it (Willis 1977) or, as in the case with Elias’ “outsiders”, reacting against it.

How this construction of community then went to generate specific cultural logics was the third point. In the enacting of cultural norms we see a logic in itself, where the rationale behind symbolic meaning becomes a self-referential and self-ordering system imbedded within a wider cultural and social context. As such, the norms of communities were shown to not be inherently ‘natural’ or a priori, but manufactured and consistently shifting in relation to the social and cultural norms around them. In this way we can see the symbolic construction of community (Cohen 1985; Cohen 1986), but also how the objects around which difference is designed are immaterial, it is purely distinction that is significant.
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How individuals go about creating hierarchies of distinction, and how this conflict and division comes to be known as community was the fourth point. In Elias’ *Established and Outsiders* we saw how community was maintained through the tension between two oppositional groups. The more powerful and well networked group gain a tremendous sense of superiority from newcomers, and newcomers ultimately assume the role of inferiors. The gossip from this hierarchical situation generated the basis of the social ties that maintained the social capital of the locale, essentially trapping the newcomers into their social role as inferior. This showed the significance of othering, but also the significance of socialising, a point touched on in later chapters.

The final point of the text was the fluid nature of contemporary community. As shown in Savage et al. (2005) and hinted at by both Florida (2002; 2005) and Lloyd (2002; 2006), the imagined dichotomies between locality and globalisation are not as evident as have been theorised. Though there are some themes of globalisation and reflexive modernism emerging in contemporary sociality, such as greater levels of transience and more reflexive consumption, the thesis of community as in decline is not a fair one. Rather it has been renegotiated to allow for these shifts in sociality, encompassing a far greater amount of ‘elective belonging’ than has previously been the case.
In conclusion, communities are complex, transient, project-based, exclusionary, manufactured, fluid and change over time. They are not as simple as Tonnies medieval villages (1963) or as soulless as Wirth’s city (1938), but they are, as Anderson (1983) points out, imagined. As in Bellah et al’s research, where the simple belief in community can cause it to exist (1985: 11), we can see how the common myth of community, once accepted, generates a platform upon which other social ties can be based. But also from Elias, we can see the way in which these myths can be remade for good or bad (1994). So to a large extent communities are constructed and fluid, and as Savage demonstrates, they can also be highly individualised.

But if community is elective and individualised, then what of the theory that suggests contemporary social decay is based on individualism? And where do theoretical positions that are based on gemeinschaft stand, especially when the perspective of community as an ultimately caring environment has been shown to be mythic? If communities can be individualised then surely so can other forms of sociality, and if communities have always been imagined, constructed and based on power relations, then the revelations of them changing to uncaring, manufactured and consumerist affair are not warranted. In fact, when both perspectives, that of realistic accounts of community and dystopian perspectives regarding the demise of community, are presented side by side they are surprisingly similar.
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What seems to be occurring is an issue of binary reduction. Community is either presented as good or bad, and contemporary life is constructed as its opposite. If life in the past was deemed to be better (gemeinschaft) then contemporary life must be not as good (gesellschaft), and if life in the past was oppressive (mechanical solidarity) then contemporary life must have more freedom (organic solidarity). As we have seen however, community is not good or bad and given this, one might also say that contemporary theories on the nature of sociality must also be tempered in the same way, to avoid further romanticism.

Consequently, we can see, particularly when theory from the previous chapter is considered, that the social groups focused on by contemporary social theorists to signify social fracturing are not as dystopian as we are led to believe. The changing nature of public space (Sennett 1974), the lack of overarching cultural identification (Bauman 2004) and the speed of change (Virilio 2005) are not so much phenomena that show society in disarray, but are more expressive of contemporary social norms. They are neither good nor bad, and possibly not even particularly new. This does not mean they are not valid observations, but rather than indicating social disorder, instead they are exemplary of the types of interactions that are common to contemporary communities.

In the following chapters we will look at examples of how communities function in urban environments. By examining these case studies of contemporary expressions of locality we will see how an outwardly fractured collection of
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individuals comes to form a community and how autonomy can work simultaneously within this framework. They will also show how superficiality, fast cultural change, overt consumption and lack of reciprocity can, instead of leading to alienation and loneliness, actually be the tools that construct quite viable urban communities.
The Perth art community

Chapter 5: The Perth art community

Introduction

The aim of the following chapter is to further our line of inquiry into social relations by providing an example of contemporary urban community in action. These communities do not adhere to classic understandings of community, appearing to outsiders as loose affiliations of style based groups. Some may see them as outwardly superficial and vacuous. However, they are inwardly well-networked cultural systems that generate a sense of place and belonging for their participants. As such, these communities, though not apparently possessing the romanticised qualities of traditional community, have high levels of social and cultural capital, and are in many ways more representative of ‘healthy’ community than constructed or contrived communities.

This, the first of two ethnographic chapters, will introduce what has been titled the ‘Perth art community’, showing who its members are, how they function socially, where they go and some central tenets of the group. However, I must once again point out that these are not highly bracketed groups, they are very fluid and without clear boundaries. As such, the categorisations that are placed on them are for research purposes only. In reality the urban groups that are defined below comprise a wide array of social networks and associations that coalesce at various times and in various spaces, generating a number of, at moments, very segregated groups, but overall a very dense and well connected social network. There are also
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numerous vague cultural affiliations that occasionally coalesce and occasionally segregate; generating more of what Bennett and Peterson termed “a local scene” (2004) than a discrete set of subcultures. In this sense, the community is more of an urban social and cultural milieu that traverses the inner city and incorporates most of the ‘alternative’ groups within it. It is quite a fluid and organic set of individuals, with most of the interactions maintained by the superficiality that is required by a large, diverse and widely spread out group. At the same time, regardless of the transience, superficiality and hedonistic nature of sociality, this network also generates a very coherent set of cultural norms and practices that function as community creation devices. So while on the one hand this chapter represents a dynamic network of associated individuals, it also represents a very real and enduring community.

The Perth arts scene

Northbridge is an inner city enclave directly north of Perth’s CBD and is the main nightlife hub for the surrounding area. Though encompassing a wider neighbourhood, the most active parts are between William Street and Fitzgerald Street, running north-south, and between Aberdeen Street and James Street running east-west (see figure1). This area contains the largest and most dense collection of bars, restaurants, nightclubs, sex shops and cafés in Western Australia and on weekend nights is filled with people from the surrounding suburbs seeking entertainment. On the fringes of this area are a number of smaller venues, galleries and shops that are not as easy to find, and though less popular
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with those that venture into the city on the weekends, is very popular with a
different set of cultural consumers.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 1: Northbridge

**Alternative Shops**

Starting at the intersection of William and Roe and running the length of William
Street are a number of small clothing and accessory shops. These are distinct from
the boutiques of the CBD, appearing far less glamorous and in some instances
looking positively decrepit. However, as with the more upmarket shops in the city
centre, they also worked on the principle of selling expensive clothing to a mainly
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youth market, but rather than attracting customers with loud music, large glass shop frontage, chrome or high fashion, they have attempted to capture the opposite image; downplaying the existence of the shop by having limited signage, not much lighting and a generally ‘low-key’ atmosphere. The products reflected this minimalist approach and were generally lacking the glamour of the CBD shops, but at the same time maintained a dirty ‘authentic’ exclusivity. Much of the merchandise was manufactured locally, either in Perth, Sydney or Melbourne and was exclusive in the sense that there were small numbers of each item for sale. For example, in one shop, all of the trousers were individually made and quite distinct, and in another the printed tee shirts were guaranteed to be part of a low production run of twenty prints. A further point of distinction between these places and the more upmarket boutiques was the way that each shop had little in the way of a coherent style. The range of produces in these places was so diverse as to avoid labelling, except in the commonality of all being distinct from what was popular in the larger shops of the city. So while eclectic and supremely diverse, all of these shops were united in their separation from the ‘mainstream’.

Below are some examples of the ways in which the displays are understated. In the first instance the racks of clothes are not accentuated at all. They are not separately lit or thrust upon the consumer, rather, they are at the rear of the shop and on closer inspection appear to be quite unordered in terms of design, colour or style. Similar themes, or rather lack of themes, apply to the accessories section and the dolls section, both of which appear more as constructs of the owner or
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assistant than of a window dresser or shop designer. In fact the entire shop, including the produce, layout, music and choice of staff appeared to reflect more of an aesthetic pertaining to each individual shop than an overarching style.

Figure 2: Disorganised and downplayed racks of clothes

In October 2007, twelve of these shops started a combined advertising campaign. This consisted of a multisided exhibition across twelve establishments and was publicised as a ‘gallery crawl’. Aside from the immediate consequence of advertising, the effect of this was twofold. Firstly, it created a structured map of William Street, where instead of having a disparate range of stand-alone, autonomous clothing shops, there was now an established and significant use of space by similar entities, creating a recognised set of shops, or a trend. The second effect was to make the link between these spaces and art very obvious.
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Figure 3: Accessories and stylised ‘retro’ displays
This link, which was initially observed through the collective exhibition, was furthered as I commenced interviewing the staff and owners of these places. While the shops at the southern end of William Street catered for more explicit subcultures and were thus less directly involved with art, those at the north end were very much a part of the local arts scene. These shops frequently held small exhibitions, sold local products and stocked work, such as tee shirts, dresses and dolls produced at the nearby art college. In one instance a shop had made two of its back rooms into a permeant exhibition space with another room as a spray paint and marker shop for, among others, the local graffiti artists.

In terms of clientele, while all shops said that most of their sales were to the young and rich, most of their patronage came from the local urbanites, or the
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surrounding population of students, artists, service industry workers and people who were ‘on the scene’. One shop owner told me of a small group of individuals she referred to as ‘the 50’s formal crew’, due to them wearing Jackie Onassis style clothing. She said that there were a number of small groups like this around town, very eclectic but yet highly cohesive in terms of dress. And it was people like this who generally came into the shops; those that were looking for some form of cultural or subcultural identification, but simultaneously looking for an individualised and to an extent, self defined style. This fact, as well as some of the above points, are covered in this extract from an interview with attendant in one of the shops.

Steve: So What’s the price range here?

Hailey: Some of it is thirty bucks, some is five hundred, we have a seven hundred dollar men’s suit.

Steve: There’s a $120 bow tie over there. Does this stuff sell?

Hailey: Yeah. Fashion is so homogenised in most stores that people will pay for something a bit different. In Myers, you can get American designed Chinese tee shirts, where people are paid two dollars to make them. But most of this stuff is Australian made, which drives the price up, and it’s smaller labels too. Mostly students that have had to put everything on the line to make it, and the price reflects it, but people
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buy it cos its something special. They’d rather have one
special thing than a hundred useless things.

Steve: So who comes in?

Hailey: The purchasers are mainly rich kids, or the loiterers [the
aforementioned subculturalists]. They just come in and
have a look and hang out and then sometimes come in and
buy stuff. It’s different having a place like this around here.
There’s so many squats and shelters around here too, the
locals are not used to the gentrification. We try and be nice
to them too.

Steve: Apart from rich kids does this stuff get worn around town?

Hailey: Yeah, it gets worn, but heaps of the people that come in
think its weird or overpriced. Then there are the people who
appreciate it, or want to look different. I wear this stuff.

Steve: Where would it be worn, where do you hang out?

Hailey: Cafés or to see bands playing. Most of the people that
come in like art and music, mainly dance and music, but are
generally into culture, which does entail fashion and stuff.

From this we can see a number of points. The first is the disregard for
homogeneity and the preference, amongst her patrons, for ‘special’ items and
tokens of individuality or authenticity. The second is the social element of these
sites; they are places where people loiter, or hang out. The third is that these are
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areas where there are lot of homeless people, or essentially where there is cheap rent. And the fourth is the relationship between the arts, culture and the type of clothing she is selling. Overall, the extract, expresses the individualism inherent in the consumption and production of both the products in the shops and the shops themselves. It also highlights the link between art, music and culture in the city. Where, in this instance, the consumption of individualised and diverse fashion is consistently worked around the dichotomy between the creative aspects of society and the mass-produced. This is quite similar to Chatterton and Hollands’ conception of distinction between the overtly consumerist and fringe cultures; where the mainstream is more to do with consumption and maintenance of markets, whereas ‘alternative’ culture becomes imbued with creativity and identity formation (2003: 83). Though obviously overly simplified, this distinction is quite evident in the ‘artistic’ mode with which these individuals construct their identities and how they go about generating the divisions between themselves and others.

Though not as popular as the high fashion clothing stores of the CBD and main shopping districts, these cheap rent, low visibility shops have a popularity and a following of their own. They are owned and run by people who are directly connected to the fringe social life of Perth, and as a result of this, as well as attracting the young fashion makers of the subcultural cityscape, they have taken on an ambience that is representative of the local subcultural and alternative scenes. So on a very real level, these shops represent the commercial face of a
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local community, or rather the public, and to an extent collective, expression of what is subculturally popular in Perth.

Galleries

Aside from this collection of shops around the edges of the entertainment centre, there is also a range of galleries and performance spaces. The largest of these are PICA (the Perth Institute for Contemporary Art) located at the east end of James Street, and The Bakery, a government funded performance space and gallery at the other, or west, end of James Street. PICA has two main gallery spaces, six smaller rooms and a theatre, all of which are in constant use, particularly by the more avant-garde but still recognised and well-known artists, exhibitions and performers. It also has an attached bar and café, with a separate, rarely used, performance space. Roughly once a month PICA hosts an exhibition opening, which is usually well attended by Perth’s professional artists, corporate sponsors, local art critics/writers, individuals attached to the more formal side of the art scene, and occasionally by the non-professional artists, students or academic and culturally elite of Perth. These events are well advertised, attract roughly 300-400 people and are part catered, with patrons generally required to purchase some of their own drinks from the bar.

While The Bakery gallery also caters for the upper end of contemporary art and performance, it is more generally associated with street and popular art than formal or institutionalised art. Its performance space runs on the same premise; catering for the avant-garde, but on a much more commercial or pop level.
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Typically, the space is used for visiting national or international acts that are considered to be non-mainstream and to an extent ‘cutting edge’, and which are generally musical acts, as opposed to performance based. This space is heavily utilised by the main local art festival ‘Artrage’ and as such is hugely popular amongst the local art and alternative music scenes. It is frequented by a wide, though reasonably exclusive, cross-section of individuals and does not have the same exclusivity as PICA. In essence it is more like a bar with a performance space and gallery attached than a gallery, but yet manages to maintain an image, though generating a very selective program of events, of being an art based venue.

Between these two venues is an arc that covers the northern fringes of the entertainment centre of Northbridge, and in which is a smattering of ten other galleries. These include a university sponsored student exhibition space, a photography gallery and a number of small public, private, state or council supported galleries, all of which have regular openings and all of which attract a regular following from various aspects the art, music and cultural scenes of Perth.

Alanna was an attendant at one of these galleries. She was an early twenties art student and agreed to talk to me regarding the Perth scene.

Steve: What happens in Perth?

Alanna: It’s quite small and you have to be in the know, if you’re not you could think that’s Perth is a social void. But it’s
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quite vibrant, but quite small and closed. There’s a range of festivals and galleries, but most people don’t know about them all.

Steve: How do you get in the know?

Alanna: Go out. Go to art school. Since I’ve been going I’ve discovered lots of stuff.

Steve: Is it open or closed?

Alanna: I think it’s quite closed. Everyone knows everyone. It’s a consequence of Perth being a big country town. If you’re in the arts, you realise that everyone knows everyone. The level of criticism isn’t there, that may happen in larger places. So everyone knows everyone, and reviews can’t really be that negative.

Steve: Is there a stylistic commonality amongst people?

Alanna: The typically arty look, bohemian, eclectic, mismatching. Most people comb the op shops [second hand clothes shops] for their ‘look’. It’s the cool of the uncool, patterns that don’t match.

Steve: Are there limits to how different you can be?

Alanna: The limits are self-imposed, some people don’t have limits but others do. You can’t go and buy the outfit, but if you go to art-school you will see it. The art community here dresses in a defined but different way.
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Steve: Do you see the art crew out aside from exhibitions?
Alanna: They are drawn to certain places, live music, and pubs. the Bakery, the Rosemount, the Scotsman.
Steve: How about music?
Alanna: Yeah, has to be alternative and slightly ‘angsty’ in my experience.
Steve: So the art scene has a collective identity?
Alanna: Yeah, but that happens to all groups.
Steve: What’s good and bad about Perth socially?
Alanna: It’s easy to be a big fish in a small pond, that’s a benefit. You can make stuff happen easier. There’s a level of accessibility there that you don’t get in other places. But there is no criticism, not like in Sydney or Melbourne, and it’s too conservative. I mean, look at this exhibition here. It’s crap, but people come and drink at the openings regardless. I’m over the whole art thing really.

From the above extract we can see a number of key points. Firstly, Alanna mentions that, due to Perth’s size, everyone knows everyone and there are lots of social events, but at the same time if individuals are not connected or not ‘in the know’ then Perth could seem a ‘social void’. So the area, or rather the community, is well connected and has a lot of activities but is simultaneously quite exclusive. A second point is the way that there is a very distinct a network of places that act
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as hubs for this crowd; they are all attracted to similar places with similar music, such as *The Rosemount*, The ‘Hydey’ (*The Hyde Park Hotel*), *The Bakery* and *The Moon Café*. So there is a geographical framework for the study, but it is more of a network that overlays the city rather than being a distinct and separate geographical area. A third is the sartorial regulations of the group. From her interview, and from some early observations, there appears to be a uniform, but not at all rigid in the way of a school uniform or the subcultural style of skinheads, for example (Hebdige 1979). This was far more non-descript and she describes it as the “cool of the uncool, patterns that don’t match”. A fourth point is that, for a number of reasons, notably cheap rent, a smaller population, less rigid subcultural groups, less cultural hierarchy, a generally more culturally transient youth population than say Sydney or Melbourne, it is easy to get events up and running, resulting in a hybridisation of events and styles across the cityscape. However, due to the small population it is difficult to maintain a following for these events, resulting in a general jadedness and high levels of cultural movement within the social environment. Another point is the highly social nature of the scene. This seems an immediately obvious and to an extent a moot point, but given the inherently private nature of art production, it is interesting that the art scene is defined as a rather hedonistic and, for want of a better expression, bohemian idyll. A final point, which relates to this bohemian idyll, is her continued reference to conservatism. From the extract, it seems that Alanna’s overriding issue seems to be with the conservative nature of both the city itself and the art scene within it. Perth is seen as too rigid and backwards, and
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the art community is seen as aping that rigidity through its uniformity, but at the same time bohemianness is attempting to define itself as the opposite of the quotidian nature of the non-artistic social environment and essentially becoming as rigid as that which it is opposing.

From the introductory interviews at the shops on William Street as well from the interview with Alanna it became evident that there were a number of key sites in community. These were The Bakery, The Scotsman, The Hyde Park Hotel, The Moon Café, PICA and Spectrum Gallery. As there was an event at The Bakery, and a number of people, Alanna amongst them, suggested I go, I chose this as my first night out.

**The Bakery**

The event was advertised as a ‘noise gig’, in which a guitarist from a popular international ‘death metal’ band and a keyboardist were going to make ‘soundscapes’. The venue itself was divided in two, inside for music and outside for smoking and socialising. When I arrived, the inside was sparsely populated, with the majority of the crowd, roughly fifty, sitting out the back. These were gathered into groups of three or four, though some were standing on their own. There was no immediately noticeable similarity in dress. Some were quite elegant, others were wearing more of an urban casual style (jeans, printed tee shirts and sneakers), and others were sporting black jeans, boots and long hair, a look synonymous locally with the metal scene. But the majority were wearing what appeared to be second hand clothes with some degree of personal affect, such as
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red boots, gaudy shirts or large coloured glasses. There did not appear to be any
real stylistic parallel between anyone at the event, though there were rough
commonalities in style between individuals sitting in groups. As the band
prepared to come on people started to move inside, which was now filled with dry
ice, so much that it was difficult to see the band, and in front of the stage visibility
was reduced to roughly a metre. When the music started it sounded like guitar
feedback with random computer noises being played extremely loudly. There
were people all around me, but due to the amount of dry ice I couldn’t make out
anyone’s face. We were all alone and making the noise into whatever we
imagined it could be. After the gig I started to poll the audience; no one had the
same experience as anyone else and everyone heard different themes in each
‘song’. So though everyone experienced the same moments together, such as a
surge in the guitar, or change of pitch of the computer noise, they all imagined it
differently. They were in a crowded space, at the same venue but creating their
own personal space and soundtrack. It occurred to me that this was individualised
art; people were hearing what they wanted to hear, but they were doing it en-
masse.

Throughout the remainder of the evening, most conversations with people I met
were centred around discussions of the event or reflections on some form of
popular or high culture. But not in a mundane way, it was generally very critical,
almost as if they were not necessarily talking about the issues at hand, but
performing the cultural critic. It became quite clear that these were not just
The Perth art community conversations, but a form of common cultural dialogue amongst peers, a social repertoire for the event, much like Hetherington’s subcultural ‘theatricality’ (1998: 153). These were people having personal discussions about their understanding of what they thought was important, but they were doing so in a way that showed a greater knowledge of culture than I would have imagined. Another interesting aspect of the conversations was the creative nature of the audience. One young man, from a poorer eastern suburb, spoke about how he liked to ‘hit things’ and record the sounds. Another individual, who was a friend of his, told me he liked to play a number of bass guitars at the same time, just for the “weird sounds” he could achieve. I remained at the venue for another three hours talking to the patrons outside.

It was here that I met Calum. He had a shaved head, gaunt features, was about thirty and wore a “Lesbian Mud Wrestling” tee shirt under a leather jacket. More importantly, he didn’t move. The crowd around him changed regularly and everyone talked to him, but he stayed in the same place, just outside the back door on the steps, which, he told me later, happened to be the closest place to the bar where he could still smoke. I approached him and asked if he would be interested in showing me around and maybe introducing me to a few people. With complete disdain he said, “I don’t know why you or anybody else would be interested in a group of wankers like this, but sure, yeah, if you want”. He proceed to tell me that the art community was “shit” and that everything was pointless as it was all based on economics and cheap fuel. The only good thing we could do, he said, was to
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get really drunk and have a good time, which was also inherently pointless. I stood next to him for roughly fifteen minutes and he pointed people out as they walked past. It seemed that he knew roughly half of the patrons at the event and was highly critical of the majority of them, though said hello to them anyway. When I left he said he would call me in a week and take me out somewhere for an interview.

The poetry reading

At six o clock in the afternoon I was standing outside of a pub on the corner of William and James Street. I had just been inside the pub looking for Calum, but the only people inside were a few groups of businessmen and a large group of backpackers. It was quite a nice pub with lots of brass ornamentation, polished woodwork and stained glass, and quite frankly, not the sort of place I expected Calum suggest we catch up; as I presumed he would have suggested a café or a less ‘mainstream’ bar. I had been waiting for Calum to get back to me for two weeks, and presumed that he had lost interest in being an informant, but he had rang and told me to be at this pub at six for what I presumed was going to be a normal recorded interview.

As I waited outside of the pub, an old car pulled up next to me and a group of people got out. They were wearing old clothes and looking very much like Alanna’s ‘art school’ description; alternative clothing, hair a bit wilder than those inside the pub, a bit dishevelled and all sporting a ‘little something’ that make them seem to not be a part of the social environment they were currently in. They
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walked past me into the pub and up some stairs. I followed the people upstairs and there was a sign that read ‘poetry reading - the female Don Juan’. I went back downstairs and while in the process of writing a text to Calum I saw another carload of people stop and go upstairs, then another, and they all looked like the sort of people from *the Bakery*.

I went back upstairs. It was not a huge room, but big enough for eighty or so people. There was a desk at the entrance with a pile of books on it and a forty-year-old woman behind it. This was the author. She was wearing a gothic-style ball-gown with large rips and bits of red plastic sewn into it. Behind her there were roughly forty people sitting and facing the front of the room where a microphone and P.A. was set up. These people were between fifty and seventy years of age, generally well dressed and all talking to each other. The bar was the far end of the room and crowded with people aged eighteen to forty, all trying to get a glass of free champagne. Next to the bar was an outside area where the smokers were. I went outside, spoke to a few of them about what the night entailed, waited for Calum and started taking notes. Strangely enough this did not get the odd looks it usually does, as lots of people were scribbling into little books. The smoking area was separated from the rest of the room by a glass wall, and from this position I could observe the goings on without being directly involved.
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The patrons were, once again, too eclectic to make any definitive statement about, until I looked down from the balcony to the rest of the pub. These people - the poets - were quite distinct from the others downstairs. From above, it was relatively easy to separate the backpackers from the businessmen by their English soccer tops and crew cuts, and it was easy to distinguish the businessmen from the locals, who were wearing jeans, printed tee shirts or polo shirts and expensive looking sneakers. But how was *my* group different?

For a start, they didn’t dress like the people below. Not that the people below had a definitive style either, they were a mixture of a number of styles, but were more ‘normal’ than the group at the poetry reading. One young man in the poetry group was wearing what appeared to be a 1980’s take on a sailor suit. Another few were dressed in something like goth paraphernalia, but not done to the extreme of heavy makeup or full goth attire - more tokens of gothness. A number of males were wearing flannel shirts and scruffy looking jeans, these also had either heavy stubble or small beards. Some females were wearing elegant dresses, but in a different style to that outside, almost as if they did not want to dress in the style of the day, but simultaneously wanted to dress up. These styles appeared, for want of a better term, ‘alternative’ and the women who dressed like this accentuated their alternativeness with something striking, such as gaudy makeup, large jewellery, shocking hair or austere fringes, and all wore round-toed shoes or boots. A number of men also wore very skinny black jeans and boots with tee shirts or shirts, and their hair in a fringe. In total, there was very little, sartorially, unifying
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this group, apart from the fact that they did not really fit downstairs, they were just a bit different. And to an extent it is that that united them; they all wanted to look different, and not just different from each other, but different from ‘normal’ people.

Another distinction of note was that they were not sitting in tight groups; they were quite mobile and skittish in their socialising. They were moving around the room, joining into group conversations and then leaving them for other groups, or breaking off into one-on-one conversations. Others were standing at the bar, or around the walls, observing the milieu, and generally looking left out, but then they would recognise someone and approach them or get chatting to someone next to them, which would lead on to another encounter. Their gregarious socialising was also distinct from those below. They were not coming in groups and sticking to them, they were here to mingle. As an aside, though the people at the poetry reading were louder, due to the larger number of them, the level of laughter coming from the pub below was greater, but was directed inwards into the small gatherings of friends.

By this time Calum had shown up. He was wandering around looking for me and generally making his way towards the bar, greeting friends as he went. By the time I caught up with him he had a glass of champagne and was talking to some people near the microphone. He introduced me to a group of three people and suggested I get them on line for some interviews in the future. We both went to
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the bar and then the poetry reading started. By this time there was roughly 80 people in the venue, all seats and available floor space was taken. The author was introduced by her editor and by the time the author got up to speak Calum was on his third champagne and whispered to me: “I usually hate these things, but this one should be good, she’s a mate of mine ... I was there when she wrote most of this stuff”.

The performance was surprisingly short, only about ten minutes, and she was literally forced to do a five-minute encore. She finished with “ok, that’s enough of that, lets get a drink”, to the applause of all. Calum turned to me and said: “Ok, lets get a drink and get out of here before someone else starts talking”. As he said this, another person got up to do a reading. We moved downstairs where it was now quite busy. I had been at the reading for an hour, had 2 glasses of free champagne, met ten people and was now being dragged into an interview by a rather drunk informant.

The interview itself was pointless, as Calum was drinking a lot, but it was the social interaction that was to be the interesting aspect of tonight. Calum, (for half an hour) proceeded to tell me how everything we know is doomed. Then the three people Calum had introduced me to earlier joined the table. It turned out that only one of these, Karen, was a friend of Calum’s. The others, Chris and Sian, were friends of hers. I proceeded to ask them questions about what they did, who they
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knew and general questions about how they fit into their immediate social environment.

Steve: Tell me about the art community in Perth.
Karen: It’s easy to meet people. I was working in the gallery and I met loads of people straight away. It’s heaps easier than Sydney or Melbourne.
Chris: And there’s less ego too. If you meet a gallery owner it’s not a big deal and you can get into exhibitions easily, less hierarchy.
Karen: I like Mount Lawley. It’s a fifteen-minute walk and you’re in the city. I don’t feel isolated, not like Midland. People here share resources.
Chris: And they are generous, they help you, it’s not all about money or success.
Karen: There is so much potential here, there’s a lot of people wanting to cross genres and stuff, and lots of people with lots of ideas.
Calum: And then we leave for Melbourne and Sydney.
Chris: But then we come back and we see all the potential and we have to do thing, and people get roped into the new returnees and they get all excited cos they see all these
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gaps. And then they burn out in 3 months when the brick walls come up.
Calum: Art will do that.
Chris: So they are excited when they come back cos its so easy to set up events, so I’ll start a poetry night or whatever and people come for a month then they stop coming and get bored and I close up shop and complain about Perth being boring until the next thing comes along.
Steve: So how does the community work?
Chris: House parties drive the whole thing.
Karen: Email lists.
Calum: Dysfunction is important. It makes us crash from one thing to the next.
Chris: It doesn’t matter who’s doing what or what is going on; we all just go to everything.
Steve: So people just do whatever is happening and this drives the community?
Chris: Yeah, well you can subscribe to some lists, but its better to listen to RTR [a local community radio station that advertises itself as ‘the sound alternative’ and is based in Mount Lawley]. That station really prides itself on Perth. You get interviews about like the stuff upstairs [the poetry reading], and then get an email from a friend. Karen told
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me to come here tonight. But more generally, yeah, the
house party creates everything.

Calum: Its only association. There is no community.

Chris. There is a community but you have to look for it, and when
you find it, if you find it, its great. I think Fremantle is
really tight, and Mount Lawley is really tight now too. In
Freo its all house parties, there are no good nightclubs and
maybe two pubs, its all house parties, its the only way to
do things.

Sian: We cant have house parties anymore cos the last time we had
one the land-lord went nuts and started smashing all our
stuff. Actually a lot of people don’t have them anymore.
Too many complaints.

Calum: Its development.

Chris: But its shit, its gentrification and its going to push people
like us out.

Karen. In terms of community, everything I do revolves around
what I do. I have a strong link with what I do all the time,
and a lot of my social scheduling feeds back into my
professional activities and is a direct part of my life, not an
external bit. So I find my community by being me.
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Chris: I still go to parties. Not to meet artists or to network, and I go to lots of gigs like this too, to listen to poetry or watch an exhibition.

Sian: But you also go to gigs to meet people, not necessarily to see the art.

Chris: But I also go to support the event.

Sian: You go to be seen to be supportive. So if you support them then they support you. But its not that calculated.

Karen: It’s nice to go to galleries and see your friends at the same time.

Steve: Why do you go to exhibitions?

Calum: Cos I’m bored; I’ve got nothing better to do.

Sian: I want to be entertained

Karen: If you want to go to see art at night its only at an opening.

Sian: I think it feels stale if there is no one there.

Karen: You have no one to talk to about the art if no one is there.

The group decided we should go to The Moon Café, which was a late night café and bar. I had heard of this place numerous times from other interviewees. Apparently it was quite popular with the art and alternative scene, and people usually ended up there after exhibitions and other evening events. The five of us walked the 200 metres to get there. There were ten people smoking out the front. Inside was separated into two sections. The front section was quite long, with
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booths on one side and a long bar on the other and reminiscent of a 1950’s American diner. This section was full, mainly with couples. There was a larger section out the back, filled with old couches as well as mismatched tables and chairs. This area was also full, but with larger groups of friends and more alcohol was being drunk than in the first. In its entirety this area was a lot more ‘subcultural’ than the last venue, but once again, was a mix of local popular subcultures. Some goth looking people, mixed with some longhaired and tight jeans wearing alternative types. The same arty looking girls as at the poetry reading and a few that looked like rocker-billies and punks, but somehow more elegant or mature; as if the fashions had become integrated into an urban style, not simply designed to shock but more to augment existing fashions and nightwear.

We found a table and got some pizza and a couple of bottles of wine. At this stage any form of interview was out of the question and we just talked about the poetry night, the café we were in and general gossip about the people in the place. As per Calum’s performance at the Bakery, the group I was with seemed to know, or know of, a large percentage of the patrons (roughly 30%) and similarly had gossip or gripes about a large percentage of these. Generally the conversation centred on individuals’ opinions of contemporary culture and of their immediate social environment in general. At the end of the night we all exchanged phone numbers and we promised to contact each other soon.

What started out possibly a waste of time turned out to be one of the most informative nights of the research. I had socialised with one of the people in the
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community, met some of his friends, watched as he met new people, met some of these new people myself, gone to a popular after hours venue and observed how these people introduce and describe themselves. As such, it showed, in part, how the superficial connections and cultural norms played out in the social area and how these people met each other. And it was also where I met Karen.

Karen was starting a postgraduate degree in photography and was assisting at a local photography gallery in Northbridge. She was sharing a house with a male rocker-billy musician and a female punk musician in Mount Lawley. She called a week later and suggested we meet in a café near her house. The café was quite minimalist, essentially bare concrete, but sporting some very large and very abstract paintings on the walls; one of which was being changed over by the artist as I waited. There was a range of people in the café: some young women with children, a table of older men, three alternative types and a couple of gay guys. Due to the noise from the very expensive sound system I sat outside. Karen showed up and we started the interview.

Steve: Thanks for the other night. The Moon was good.

Karen: I’m so sick of it now. I used to go quite a lot but I’m over it.

You end up there quite a lot cos it’s the late place and its always open. You would never organise to meet at the moon, cos your probably going to end up there anyway.

Steve: Tell me about your normal socialising activities
Karen: We have a house with four people in it. We’re all involved in creative industries. Frank and Heather are musicians and are always playing gigs. Laura is a costume designer. I’m an artist photographer.

Karen: We used to have lots of parties or not really parties, more just people coming over to our house after events. But earlier this year there was a big shift in the culture when we stopped having it as a party house. We all got a bit jaded with it, got too busy with study, work whatever. And we didn’t want it open like that. When a house is open people think they can just drop around and that was starting to happen. People were starting to use our place as a bit of a community centre.

Steve: So you’re having a quiet time at the moment?

Karen: Not really. I still go out heaps, just not as often as I used to.

I lived on a farm for a couple of years. So my social life there was pretty quiet. We’d have friends over or play the bongos for a really exciting night. So when I moved to Perth I went out every night. I went to every gig and it didn’t take long to get sick of going out in Perth, ‘cos its all the same. It’s big enough that you get a lot of the things you get out of living in a city, but it’s still a bit limited in terms of what is available. It wasn’t long until I’d seen all
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the bands I’d liked and the same people kept showing up all
the time.

Steve: So where did you go?

Karen: Mainly the Hydey [Hyde Park Hotel].

Steve: What about other events?

Karen: The last house party was at ours. But every time we have a
party it gets out of control with 300 people. It’s a shame we
can’t do parties anymore, but new party houses keep
coming up.

Steve: How did you meet your housemates?

Karen: Our other housemate went out with this guy who played in
a band with Heather’s boyfriend, and we were looking for
someone to move in. I knew Frank from gigs and then
Louisa moved in from answering an ad at the supermarket,
and Heather fits the vibe of the house. The guy who lived
there before me organised electro groups.

Steve: Describe who you hang out with.

Karen: Cos I’m a student I tend to associate with people in
academia but in the arts part of academia.

Steve: Is there a dress code?

Karen: They don’t spend a lot of money on cloths, not upper class,
most are student or working at say, putting on movies.
They’re struggling artists and most are over twenty-five.
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Very heavy thinkers, very analytical, very enthusiastic and all are working on something?

Steve: How do feel connected to Perth

Karen: I don’t come from here, but have made a home here. I came here by default. I wanted to run away from a situation and the only place I could afford to go was Perth. I never planned to stay, but I guess it must be okay if I’m still here. And I have created a family for myself that I haven’t had before.

Steve: I can’t find anybody that doesn’t create something?

Karen: I think you’d find that at more commercial venues. Someone who was just a cultural consumer probably wouldn’t give you the time of day. But I guess that’s one thing about Perth which is unique, there really seems to be a lot of creative people. I’ve met more creative people here than anywhere else.

Steve: Is there community in Perth?

Karen: My involvement with things is not about meeting the needs of the community; it’s about meeting my own needs. I serve the community by serving myself. I don’t think it’s selfish. It makes sense. If you’re in a position to know what you think then … You’ve got to go out there to see it. It doesn’t come to you: There are some spaces and I feel
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comfortable, and it’s in these spaces where things happen. I go to a space where I know people are going to be here. If I go to PCP [Perth Photography Gallery], Spectrum or The Bakery I know my friends are going to be there. There will be people that I like. And there’s not really any shortage of events. I’m never bored or starved of social opportunities.

Steve: How would you describe the people at the Moon Café.

Karen: Indy [independent]. Its like rock but not, like a non-descript style of rock. It doesn’t fit punk. Its inner city, trendy, cheap, but different trendy. Trendy for a lower class market. People who have money are more likely go to the Brisbane [a local pub]. People say there is no class, but there is. If you are cashed up, your friends are probably going to have stuff and you probably go out to the Musk Wine Bar as opposed to the Scotsman.

Steve: If you guys had money would you go to the expensive places?

Karen: No. I could be earning good money, I have the skills, but something stops me from doing soulless advertising, something fairly innate. I do know what I want to do and I do it, regardless of the unstable future I have as a result.
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As per the previous interview excerpt, there are a number of issues that need attention drawn to them prior to moving on. The first of these is the general sociality, which plays out in a number of ways. In the examples of the poetry reading above we saw how both Calum and myself met a number of people through knowing one person, and by sharing a table we formed something of a unit that became tangible for the night, allowing us to move venue and still remain cohesive. Even through this grouping was just for the night it allowed me to become acquainted with Karen, who then went on to introduce me to others. Although this form of ‘snowballing’ is relatively common for ethnographic work, I have to point out that I was not looking for extra informants, this was just how the social system operated; getting lots of people together quickly and then allowing the group formations to dissipate. It is these ‘micro crystallisations’ that allow for individuals to get to know, or to know of, each other; effectively spreading and connecting individuals throughout the community. Another way that this connectivity was evident is in the way that Karen described how the housemates all met. This system of knowing friends of friends, of being loosely connected to, or knowing of, people is the social fluidity out of which the less transient groupings of ‘housemates’ arise. Even the very idea of housemates is interesting. It is assumed that these people will live with each other, and that they will share houses with others who are not their close friends. All of this engagement with ‘strangers’ is done in the face of a huge amount of socialising. As mentioned by both Alanna, from the gallery, and Karen, above, there is a abundance of social events that these people can attend, and though it has not yet
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been commented on, it has been hinted that this mass sociality is actually one of the markers of the community, or that one of the markers of community membership is this desire for socialising.

The second theme that emerged is that of individual creativity. To this point, the majority of individuals I have spoken to were involved in the production of some form of cultural artefact; be it photography, music, art, graffiti or the organising of space or events to exhibit them. This seems self evident, especially given the fact that the research is into the ‘art’ community, but what emerged was not simply a theme of cultural production, or even the assumption of being artistically active, but the way in which became a form of distinction between the individuals in the scene and those outside of it. For example, Karen’s statement that “Someone who was just a cultural consumer probably wouldn’t give you the time of day”, is indicative of some of the forthcoming comments regarding membership to this group, and is something that the reader should be aware of when reviewing the transcripts below.

The third theme is that of an overarching individuality, but it is an individuality that is simultaneously combined a very large amount of time spent in communal activity. In the above Karen suggests, a number of times, that she is happy where she is, that the area she is in makes her feel connected and that she has a community around her. But at the same time, particularly in the ‘poetry reading’ section, she suggests that she is essentially out for herself. To Karen, her art is her
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life and anyone else that comes along for the ride becomes part of her community, as can be seen in the quote: “My involvement with things is not about meeting the needs of the community, it’s about meeting my own needs. I serve the community by serving myself”. So there is little acknowledgement of a community operating on any great level. Individuals are also very aware of their own individuality and absolutely maintain their separation from those around them, however, they maintain contacts, adopt cultural norms and continually socialise in the same groups, effectively generating and maintaining a community without meaning to. The extracts from field notes, below, are presented by way of highlighting these points.

**Two art exhibitions in one night.**

Over the next two weeks Karen became something of a key informant. She was particularly forthcoming about gigs, performances, exhibitions and other events that were indicative of the urban subcultural milieu. One such night was an opening at Spectrum gallery, a university funded exhibition space. This was to be held on Halloween night (31st October) and promised to be spectacular. Through some other sources, I had heard that there was also a more formal exhibition opening at PICA the same night and also that there was a special Halloween night at a local bar (the Hula Bula Bar), which generally had an ‘arty’ and ‘alternative’ crowd. The plan was to go to PICA from six until seven, to Spectrum Gallery until nine and then to the Hula Bula bar. I had not arranged to see anyone, but was expecting to see some of the informants I had thus far met.
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PICA is in the ‘Cultural Centre’ of Perth; a concrete fortress like structure containing a very empty piazza and amphitheatre, surrounding which is the state museum, the state art gallery and library, two small performance spaces and PICA. When I arrived there were twenty people sitting in the amphitheatre facing the gallery. They were alone and I presume waiting for friends before entering the exhibition. As I stood outside, a number of people approached and entered. Generally they were ‘alternative’ looking, sporting the fashions I had seen at the shops on William street.

Inside, apart from some official looking people and some very large paintings, the main gallery was empty. To my left was the bar, which was full. The attendant behind the front desk, who was a minor informant, told me to go get a free drink before the bar rider ran out. There were roughly fifty people here mingling and eating the cheeses and olives at the bar. I didn’t know anyone in this room and no one approached me or tried to speak to me. Without people there to support me I was feeling out of place, so I sat in the corner and observed the milieu around the bar, feeling very much alone. After this I went into the gallery space, where I saw Calum, the informant from the poetry reading and *The Bakery*. He was wearing his “Lesbian Mud Wrestling” tee shirt and leather jacket again, but regardless of the ostentatious and possibly offensive message, he blended in perfectly with those around him. As I approached, and without any form of greeting, he said, “This is all crap, lets get a drink”. Back in the bar, and feeling more settled, he introduced me to a number of his friends who smiled briefly and then returned to
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their previous conversations. We stood here for fifteen minutes until we were informed that there were going to be speeches, during which time the bar was to be closed. We, along with the majority of the bar, went to the main gallery, which was now full. After ten minutes of speeches the people towards the rear of the gallery, where we were standing, started talking amongst themselves, and dispersed back to the bar. We followed them and were told that the bar was no longer free and was now full price. The bar area was now quite friendly, people seemed less closed and were more open to strangers and general conversation, as opposed to just talking to their friends.

We went upstairs to a smaller and more avant-garde gallery, where a number of Calum’s friends were exhibiting. This was very conceptual art, and the crowd here was younger (and odder) looking than downstairs. Calum left me to speak to some friends and I wandered around looking at the art. A third of the people in the room, roughly thirty, were also doing this, while the rest stood in the middle of the room talking. As I was looking at the work a number of people started to talk to me about it, asking whether it was any good, the significance of it and what it all meant. I started a number of conversations with strangers about similar topics, which occasionally moved onto other topics, but generally still to do with things cultural. This space was more reminiscent of a party, as people were freely conversing, and I noticed that while earlier I was reluctant to speak to others, having looked at the art and generated a commonality with others at the show, was enough to give me the confidence to start talking to strangers. After half an
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hour of moving around the room looking and commenting on the art, Calum found me and suggested we leave. Out the front of PICA there were thirty or so people gathered in small groups smoking, we joined one group and Calum suggested that they come with us to the next exhibition. They asked if there was going to be free alcohol, and Calum assured them that there would.

Spectrum gallery is about 500 metres from PICA and is funded by Edith Cowan University as the performance and display space for its media and art students. When we arrived at Spectrum there were ten people smoking out the front. Just inside the door were three displays of light and colour, with twenty people looking at the work and talking to each other. This room contained four televisions and a number of light shows that were competing for attention; the darkness of the room and the various points of light had the effect of making the room spin and appear very chaotic. The sound of thumping techno and feedback was coming from somewhere out the back of the gallery and generally drowning out the sound of all the other exhibitions. In the main room an attendant was serving drinks. The drinks here were cask wine (4 litres of very cheap wine in a box) and a punch bowl with a mix of substances in it; vodka, lemonade, cordial, wine and guarana (apparently), and was being handed out freely to anyone with a glass, which were very difficult to find. The hostess was putting either an olive or candy teeth in the top of each glass and laughing uncontrollably when she did so. I later learnt that she was a lecturer of some of the students at the event. This room contained more images and lights, and was darker than the front room and
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the music was louder. The back room had a sheet on a wall with psychedelic images being projected onto it. Standing in front of it were two DJ’s dressed in white protective suits and gas masks playing loud techno and feedback patterns on two computers. The people around me were younger than at PICA, generally in their mid twenties, but speckled with the occasional older person. Dress-wise, the majority were wearing various reflections of subcultural and alternative attire, though some were also wearing relatively normal clothes. A few were dressed up in fancy dress, which was a mix of inappropriate clothing and wigs, rather than any specific theme. The art itself was a mixture of projections onto various canvasses and backlit, abstract photography. Back outside, everyone I came with was talking and smoking.

Figure 5: Psychedelic DJ
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While we were standing here Calum gave me an overview of who everyone at the venue was. We were not there for long, but it got louder and more drunken the longer we stayed. The big bowl of alcohol was getting topped up with cheap wine, which ran out just after nine, after which it was suggested that we go to the Hula Bar. As we left I noticed an argument breaking out between two people regarding who owned a particular glass.

In sum, this event was much more fluid than PICA and was very reminiscent of a themed party. The patrons were drinking lots, talking to each other and being quite loud, there was little in the way of gallery decorum, and if people were quiet they did not get spoken to. It also seemed as if the audience were the actual show, especially Alanna and Mary, who were painted blue and red, and Karen, who was also dressed up as an ‘old crone’, in an old ball gown and a black wig. The opening was more of a party, and the patrons were the art: though the art did provide a focus for something to do while not talking.
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Figure 6: The bar at Spectrum
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Figure 7: Alanna and Mary in Blue and Red

When I approached the Hula Bula bar, the security guard promptly refused me entry. I saw some other people who I presumed had been refused entry and stood next to them asking them about the place. After talking for five minutes one of the girls told me she was actually the manager and was outside monitoring the security guards; they had been told to be selective about who they let in, but were being ‘wrongly’ selective. Rather than excluding the more ‘mainstream’ clientele and only allowing the neo-bohemian types, they were doing the opposite, resulting in the ‘wrong’ type of person being allowed entry.

Steve: So what’s happening here then?
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Kim: The owners want more of the cooler people here, their sort of people. But there’s just not enough of us.

Steve: Is there a set group that comes?

Kim: No category, 18-80. In Perth you can’t have an exclusive place. We’d be doing it if we could, but we can’t.

Steve: So where do you go for that exclusivity?

Kim: Nowhere really. Nothing commercial breeds that. If we go somewhere we go to a party. I’ll take you to one of ours sometimes. Get more of us involved. All of us are really talkative. In Perth you have to pay your dues, you have to go out and seek the community. I mean look at you, I’ve only just met you, but now I know you. You have seeked it out and it’s happened. But if you don’t look for it, you could watch TV for the rest of your life and nothing would happen. No one will come to you. It’s not that kind of place.

The Hula-Bula Bar advertises itself as a Tiki bar. Every inch of it is covered in bamboo and Hawaiian paraphernalia, the drinks are all exotic and the music is Jamaican ska. It is a very small venue, with only six large tables, a small bar area and limited floor space. Tonight everyone seemed to be talking to everyone, and the bar resembled more of an open party than a pub; a regular later informed me that this type of sociality is rarely the case, generally people come in small to
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medium sized groups and spend the entire night sitting at one of the large tables. She also said that that this evening seemed to epitomise what the club was set up for, which was the cool, hip and alternative crew in Perth, not just the ‘rich wannabe’s’ that usually come. One of my students was behind the bar, and another was there with friends, which was very surprising, and further established the ‘small town’ feel of Perth. I spent an hour here, briefly talking to people who were moving from group to group and conversation to conversation, as they walked from the bar to the toilet to the dance floor and back.

Winding up: at the pub

Two weeks after this event I reinterviewed Karen about the events of that night above and also to ask what she had been doing since. Apparently the exhibition at Spectrum had finished up at eleven and everyone had gone to the Hula Bula bar for an after party that lasted until the early hours; presumably much to the security guards disgust and Kim’s delight. Otherwise, some other ‘post-grad’ students and her were in the process of organising an exhibition, and the ‘end of year exhibition’ for the photography students was also being planned for later that week. She made more comments about the community she was a part of and its shared resources and then suggested we go to the pub to meet some of her friends.

The Flying Scotsman is one of the three major pubs in Mount Lawley. It has a number of promotions, such as a student cheap beer night, experimental performance/music nights and cheap food on Sundays. The aim of these are presumably to attract the student, art, drama and musician communities that study
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at the adjacent conservatorium of music and the local art colleges. When Karen
and I arrived it was roughly three in the afternoon and four of her friends were
sitting at a large outdoor table.

Steve: So what do you guys get up to on the weekends?

Matt: It was my birthday the other day; I invited half of Perth and only
four people showed up. We got really wasted and did heaps of
[magic] mushroom powder and pills [ecstasy] and talked shit.

Steve: Is this normal?

Matt: More of an indulgence for me, but I’m always around it within the
demographic that I live. I’ve got a friendship group of 30 or so that
I see regularly and drugs are pretty prevalent.

Steve: Do you have different people for different events?

Matt: Not really, it’s a hybrid group of the same people every day. They
get annoying, but what can you do.

Steve: Where do you hang out?

Matt: Mainly here [The Scotsman]. We used to go to The Amplifier [an
alternative music venue], but we’re over it now. Then just at each
other’s houses. We have a big group so we go to lots of house
parties. Generally if you hear about the parties then you can go.

Steve: Is there any form of similarity amongst your friends?

Matt: Creative things, music art cinema. I don’t try to wear a uniform, but
you can tell who is from where from what they wear. I think its just
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natural that people wear a representation of where they are and their personality, even if they don’t think about it. I mean we’re all wearing black jeans, we go to local gigs too. Tom here is in a local band so we go to lots of them at The Bakery, The Hydey and in Freo a bit.

Someone walks past they know. All turn to talk and listen

Steve: It seems like people here just stop and talk to each other.

Matt: It’s the demographic of people, I know that there going to be into the same kind of things I’m going to be into, so I don’t have to go to a social gathering and put up with aimless pointless conversation. You know totally impassionate stuff, which really annoys me. I hate conversation for conversations sake.

Steve: What’s good about here [Mount Lawley].

Matt: Planet Books and Planet Video. The Scotsman. And it’s central as well. All my friends live around here. The people here are more interested in creative things naturally gravitate towards here or Fremantle. It’s all about knowing that there are going to be people like you and having conversations about stuff you like. The whole community stems from that. We’re into the same thing. Then the exhibitions and stuff come from that and build on it.

Steve: Where do you meet people?

Matt: I meet heaps of people out, not the people I would jump in front of a bus for, but associates, and social acquaintances. I have lots of
Erica: Generally community is dead. But I’ve got a community here. I know everyone here ‘cos you try and make friends with the shopkeeper and stuff, but most people don’t want to try and speak to their neighbours.

Tony: That’s cos you go to the same places so often.

Erica: Yeah. I go to the shops 10 times a day, but I only experience community here, they don’t do it in the suburbs.

Karen: There is definitely community here, cos it makes space for the art.

Tony: But it’s not a standard community.

Matt: There’s a massive ‘us against them’.

Erica: Like the difference between us and the people in Morley.

Erica: In the outer suburbs there wouldn’t be as much.

Tony: There’s a lot more places to hang out here.

Matt: And there’s certain reasons why people gravitate to Mount Lawley, more than say Dianella.

*James, another friend, arrives at the table having come from work*

Steve: Like what?

Matt: Well I’m a writer.

Erica: I make and sell dolls.

Tom: I’m in a band.

Tony: Artist, writer.
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Steve: I can’t find anyone who doesn’t do anything around here.

Erica: You should go to Morley

Tony: You’d get bashed [laughing]

At this time three girls show up and tell the table about a movie night they have organised at one of the universities. The group agree not to go, but to go to see a band instead. They then give up their table to a group of five other friends that are walking past.

**Artrage closing party**

By this point I had been involved in researching the community for two months, during which, particularly amongst the artists, there had been much talk of ‘Artrage’. This is an art festival predominantly held in Northbridge, and which traditionally draws large crowds for its mix of avant-garde performance, art and in particular, it’s opening and closing parties. This year the Closing party was to be held in four different venues all within 100 metres of each other to the west of Northbridge. These venues were *The Bakery, The Toyshop* (an abandoned car sales space), *Cargo City* (a construction made of large cargo containers) and *The Old Berlin* (an unused nightclub). The venues were to host: alternative bands; hip-hop and a graffiti exhibition; live alternative music and a photography exhibition of Artrage; and roughly twenty artistic performances, respectively. Most of the informants had mentioned this event as some stage, suggesting I go, as it would be the art highlight of the year.
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I started the evening at the art performance space, the old Berlin. As I entered, two girls dressed as 1900’s servants offered me cakes with images of dead babies on them and gave me a programme for the night. There were to be twenty performances over 6 hours including music, dance, poetry and performance. Roughly a hundred people were in the main area watching a girl performing some poetry, while upstairs a band was setting up. This was Calum’s band and they were about to do a fifteen minute noisescape to war imagery. As they played the crowd wandered around looking at the stationary art, which consisted of two projector pieces and three standalone statue/installations. The courtyard area contained fifty people and a parked car with a projected image of a man running naked down a street in front of it, an audio track of a car engine running was also playing. Patrons were invited to sit in the car to experience the footage. Back inside groups of women dressed as airhostesses were offering people more dead baby cakes while Mary, a friend of Alanna, was doing her performance piece of dancing wildly to a pop tune.
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Figure 8: Old Berlin / Car with Projection of naked man

I left the old Berlin and walked to Cargo City, on the way there were roughly fifty people walking between the two venues. When I arrived there was a band playing what sounded like Latin dance music. They stopped shortly after I arrived and the crowd either went out the back to the smoking area or to the bar. The people here looked more conservative and were not as extravagantly, or subculturally dressed as at the previous venue. The halfway between the main stage and the outside area was lined with photos from this and previous Artrages. Other than this there was no art, so to speak. The back area was full and much more socially fluid and party like than inside. I spoke to a few people here about the evening and all said they had one or two performances they wanted to see, but were going to wander around for the night “just looking at stuff”.

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The Toy Factory was by far the quietest, but in my mind the most well laid out and most resembling of a gallery of the four spaces. Inside was a maze of partitions, with every wall covered with hangings of graffiti, ink work, skateboard designs, individually painted tee shirts and numerous other styles. Towards the front of the room were three DJ’s some turntables and a P.A., which filled the room with hip-hop and had the twenty or so people watching them, dancing. Due to the large amount of space and constant traffic of people coming and going this space stayed quite empty for much of the night. Though according to a later source was quite full after eleven. Individuals here were a mix of arty and alternative looking types with a majority that were dressed as part of the hip-hop scene.

Figure 9: The Toy Factory wall
The Final venue I went to was The Bakery. It was here that I ran into four of my interviewees. They were spread out in the back area and introduced me to their friends. The atmosphere here was once again very party-like, particularly in the outside area, with quick exchanges and rapidly changing conversation partners. Inside was a lot more formal, with either the band or the bar getting the attention of the patrons. Conversation here was kept to small groups of friends or possibly to associates, but was generally taken outside if consistine of more than a nod or a brief hello. Attached to the inside was a small gallery containing a number of installations and small wall-pieces. The work here was quite elegant and was being commented on by the twelve people in the room. The turnover of this space
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was quite high, as individuals came in, looked about quickly and then left for either the bar room or the outside area.

Figure 11: The Bakery, outside
As it stood, even before going, the programme for the entire event seemed to represent the community I had been examining. Here were four different venues, all playing different types of music, but all under the banner of ‘art’. Art and music were fused together to create a spectacle of entertainment that was also creative and to an extent individualised, as everyone chose their favourite space. As each venue was open to anyone who had a ticket, there were people wandering between events and venues all night, taking in a bit of hip hop and then some performance art, followed by a band and a DJ set, all the while having varied access to a number of exhibition spaces; though these were typically ignored in favour of drinking, dancing and talking.
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This poly-culturalism and cultural omnivorousness (Carrabine and Longhurst 1999) was to an extent one of the defining features of this community. There was no set subcultural theme and no definitive form of dress or cultural taste. Instead most individuals seemed to flow between urban cultures, having knowledge of, and partial affiliation with, many of them. Basically they generated their own style out of the many distinct subcultural styles available to them. This eclecticism was so diverse as to suggest this was not a community at all, as everyone appeared different. But at the same time, given that these people socialised regularly, had a reasonably common set of cultural norms, gossiped about each other, generated in and out groups, and had well-established cultural institutions actually made them an excellent example of a community in action.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to draw attention to some of the concepts that I have alluded to in the above and, prior to moving onto the next location, start to articulate the key themes that have arisen from the research.

The overriding issue about the community was the outwardly shattered, or apparently non-communal nature of it. This was evident in the superficial nature of conversations, the transience of individuals between groups, the lack of a coherent cultural ideal and the lack of a common dress code, though this last point is more pertaining to subculture than community. But yet, in the face of this ‘norm’ of individualised distinction there were communal resources, cultural norms, localised hubs of activity and mass sociality, which are generally
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organised by and through the local network of cultural activity. People in this scene knew of each other and knew how to communicate across the poly-cultural matrix of the cityscape. And though the links between these individuals may not have been terribly deep, they were of such a high volume as to create a very dense and very effective system for the generation and proliferation of communal norms.

So in essence the above defined a highly individualistic, hedonistic and superficial community that was drawn together through a common focus on art, as well as a general dismissal of those not involved in creativity and ‘alternative’ lifestyles. There was something of a bohemian idyll in operation then, where everything that was valued in ‘mainstream’ society was not valued here. The implicit laws of the community placed passion, individualism and creativity over that of financial wellbeing and conservatism, and in the process created one of the key community building devices of the group; that of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

The next chapter continues this theme but focuses on the second community, the house party community in Fremantle. And though there is less of a focus on art and style, the community appears quite similar in its focus on hedonistic activity, individuality and its distinction from mainstream, or mundane, activity.
The Fremantle house party community

Chapter 6: The Fremantle house party community.

Introduction

As with the previous chapter, this chapter examines a contemporary, non-traditional community, namely the house party community of Fremantle, Western Australia. It is non-traditional in that, once again, it does not outwardly comply with gemeinschaft notions of what community should entail. It is fractured, plural, superficial and individualised, but is simultaneously cohesive, generates belonging, is capable of defining common norms and is socially supportive. As was covered in the methodology chapter, the aim of providing a second ethnography was to allow abstraction of the central themes occurring across a number of communities. In this way, concepts that were applicable to communities ‘in general’ could be noted. So while the activities described in this chapter are distinct from those of the previous chapter, they may also appear quite similar. Consequently, any repetition that occurs between this and the last chapter should be seen as intentional and as part of the methodology to examine the commonality existing between two very distinct communities.

Fremantle

Fremantle (Freo) is a satellite town 26 km southwest from the CBD of Perth. There are a number of similarities between it and Northbridge (the setting of much of the activity of the previous chapter). As with Northbridge, it is an older part of Perth and as such consists of much denser housing, and therefore a denser population than newer areas. Similarly, it is an entertainment and shopping
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district, attracting people from many of the surrounding suburbs, particularly on
the weekend. And it also has a fringe community that typically utilise spaces on
the outskirts of the town, though this is more of a generalisation than a rule and is
dependent on the venue and the context.

There are, however, a number of differences between the two sites. The difference
in Size is the most obvious distinction. Northbridge and Mount Lawley are two
suburbs that are almost entirely devoted to entertainment and could be seen as
extensions of the CBD. As such, there is a larger population and far more
amenities available to individuals living in these areas. As a product of this there
are more activities, and given that these attract different crowds, it allows for
more subcultural fracturing than occurs in Fremantle. Fremantle, on the other
hand is quieter, has less differentiation between subcultural activities and is more
of a village than a city. Partly as a function of this, partly due to its history as a
counter-cultural haven and partly as a result of successful advertising by the local
tourism bodies, Fremantle is seen as “laid back”, “arty”, and as the cultural centre
of the region. The reality of this is doubtful, as it has similar amounts of anti-
social behaviour and arguably less artistic output than Northbridge, but regardless
of statistics, this has become a locally held belief, resulting in Northbridge and
Mount Lawley having a more metropolitan, edgy and subcultural feel, and
Fremantle a more relaxed, and village-like ambiance.
The Fremantle house party community

Figure 13: Fremantle map and key research sites

The social centre of Fremantle is the coffee strip (see figure 13); roughly three hundred metres of alfresco coffee shops, pubs and restaurants punctuated by clothing shops. At one end is the train station and at the other end the Fremantle markets and food hall. Most public and entertainment activity occurs on, or adjacent to, this area, though, as with Northbridge, activities such as original music and art exhibitions occur on its peripheries. However, due to the low population there is a limit on the number of venues, particularly those that have alcohol licences for after midnight. As a result of this, plus some other factors, namely the cost of alcohol at commercial venues, the ‘types’ of people these
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venues attract (‘outsiders’), and the over-regimentation of activities at these venues, numbers of the local population have resorted to hosting their own ‘after-hours’ entertainment. It is this group that the ethnography will focus on, not simply due to their nocturnal practices, but because it is through participating in these social institutions that they come to know each other. And it is through interacting at these spaces that they negotiate the common cultural norms and generate the social networks that produce communities.

However, the chapter title is somewhat generalised. The community that this chapter represents is infinitely more complex and diverse then can be defined by a single title. It comprises many different groups, all of which are continually changing. In fact the very nature of Fremantle, due to its attraction to a very transient population, makes the definition of a singular or static community almost impossible. However, these groups share the commonality of regularly frequenting and hosting house parties. Essentially, the house party provides the social space for communing and acting as a nexus for the wider community. And while it is only one of the spaces where individuals meet, and in no way definitive of individual community members, it is the commonality that the majority of members share and is the key site for the development and transfer of local culture. As such, the title reflects, not the whole of the community, but the significant institution that allows for the many diverse groups to become a community.
The Fremantle house party community

As covered in the methodology chapter, having lived in Fremantle for ten years this ethnography was quite different from the previous one. And as such it will also be presented differently. Rather than developing a narrative through describing the research from start to finish, what this chapter will do is to present themes that arose during the research as a way of capturing the lived reality of community members. By way of introduction what will be described is the closing party for the Fremantle Festival, one of the few evenings when locals gather en-masse into the centre of town.

Field notes: The Fremantle festival and the food hall

The food hall, just off Marine Terrace (the main street), is situated in a pedestrian area next to the Fremantle markets. It contains a number of Asian food stalls and a bar. There is also an outside eating area, which, especially in the evenings of the warmer months, is rarely empty. It is here that the diversity of Fremantle can truly be seen. On any night the clientele can consist of professionals, families, teenagers, groups of males and females, and the many groups and subcultures (hippies, musicians, artists) that make up the area. In fact this site is so entrenched as a public resource in Fremantle that all bar two of the interviewees considered it one of the central spaces in Fremantle for communal activity. It is not uncommon for a quiet night at the food hall to transform into a small party, as groups of ten to twenty people obtain information about the forthcoming night or weekend’s activities.
On the day of the street party an informant (Phil) texted me about a gathering at the food hall. His aim was to acquire a table and to sit there for the day until the street party started. He considered this “prime real estate” for the day, as he could eat, drink, meet with friends and be near the entertainment while not paying pub prices for beer. By two pm, roughly half the tables at the markets were being used. Central Fremantle itself was extremely busy and some of the major roads had been closed to traffic leaving the main streets as an open market place. The group at the markets consisted of four close friends, five associates and a number of people I had never met, though I recognised some of them. Everyone was talking to each other but conversations were constantly being interrupted as members of this group stopped to talk to pedestrians they were friends with.
By four pm the food hall was full. From where we were sitting it was now too busy to see the main street, roughly fifty metres away, but the noise had grown considerably and it sounded as if live music was being played. Two of Emma’s friends walked up and sat at our table, we were all introduced and started to pair off into small dynamic conversation groups, still punctuated by passers by. After another half hour two of Phil’s friends came up to our table and, after finding chairs, sat down. Phil got another table and added it to ours. This continued until six pm. By this stage there were roughly twenty people around the two tables. At this point the conversations were so dynamic and fused with the tables surrounding us that the tables stopped being discrete units and became part of the surrounding milieu. People were standing near our table talking to others nearby, members of our group were talking to people at other tables, and everyone was changing seats to move into different conversations. One of the houses opposite the food hall was occupied by a group of local young hippy/punks. They had roughly fifty people in their front garden and they were starting to spill out onto the mall area. The torn clothes and dreadlocks of this group mixed quite easily into the post-punk/generation X look of ours, which blended easily in the plurality of styles, ethnicities and cultures surrounding us. By seven the site more resembled an open party than a food area; the market space was filled, with individuals talking to each other and loud music coming from the main street. Around this time consensus was reached that it was time to walk the fifty metres to the stage area on the main street.
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Figure 15: Food hall at 4 pm turning into a party. Hippy house in the background begins merging with the street.

This area was even more diverse than the food hall. A large Indian contingent was evident, as were a large number of the local African population. This, combined with the high visibility of the local subculturalists, a good amount of median demographic white Australians, set to a background of Italian restaurants and coffee shops, with an Indian hip-hop soundtrack, made the area resemble the idyllic melting pot experience that Fremantle is regularly advertised as. Personally I saw very little of the gig as I was constantly manoeuvring to get through the crowd following my partner (Lee) as she looked for friends, but while doing so I was continually bumping into people I knew from around Fremantle. Towards the end of the gig there were numerous ‘camps’ of people around the main dancing area, of which we were one. The group we were with was changing regularly as
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people were going into the dancing area, retreating from the melee, or going to the pub. The gig finished at ten pm, whereupon individuals left with others to continue the night in a number of private houses for small house parties.

General sociality

The above was quite an extraordinary day and night, and possibly one of the most eclectic and diverse events in Fremantle. Other similar evenings do occur, but are infrequent and prone to attracting one or two of the cliques in Fremantle, and not the broad spectrum of the above. A far more mundane expression of local sociality comes from Gary, a late twenties local performer.

Steve: Describe your life in Fremantle.

Gary: I come to the café most days, to grab a coffee, work and catch up with people. Its nice ‘cos there’s a great mix of people with different interests and different ages. The good thing about Freo is that there’s a precedent of a number of generations of people who have been more novel in the way that they’ve gone about their life and made a living. There appears to be a lot more people that run their own businesses and change careers. They have a healthy mix of work and life and it’s important to have that interaction and building networks and enjoying intellectual conversations and talking shit. I like to go out and see bands one or twice every two or three weeks: The Sail and Anchor, The Swan
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*Basement.* I like to drink so I like to go drinking at those places as well as *Little Creatures.* I like going for dinner at the food hall. I like the way in Freo you just bump into people on the street and the social network down here is a lot more diverse and more stimulating than when I was up in the hills. Dancing is good. I’m not really into nightclubs, never really was; mainly just bars. I’ve got a few mates that are DJs and I go to few parties, maybe once every week or so. They’re normally parties at houses. Parties tend to have more dancing. It doesn’t rock unless its got a dance floor. A lot of people in Fremantle see a lot of people that they think are interesting but haven’t met them, but the dance floor is a great place to not necessarily have a conversation but to get down, smile and be together. You don’t need to have a formal or informal introduction. A space is created by the dance floor, it’s a ‘we’ space. A space where you are *with* others.

Steve: How many people would you go out with?

Gary: Up to four people and possibly arrange to meet three to four others there. Same at the food hall, but usually just bump into people at the food hall.

Steve: Always the same friends?
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Gary: Sometimes, but sometimes not. In fact it’s different every week. It just feels like the same crew cos I end up seeing them all eventually, like over three weeks or something.

Rhianna, a mid thirties athlete, has a similar position on both the multiplicity of spaces and the forms of sociality she engages in.

Steve: What would your normal week entail?

Rhianna: On Thursday I might go to the Upmarkets [food hall] to chat about life the universe and everything. Friday night, maybe catch up with some friends and maybe go to a party. Saturday would be maybe go out to another party or a gig and then a party. Sunday is for training and then probably catching up with some crew for a comedown session at a pub or someone’s house.

Steve: And this is with the same group?

Rhianna: Yeah … No. It’s the same groups, but different people from the group each week. In fact it’s not really a group at all; it’s *my* group. It’s the people I know, but the others don’t know the same people. So … I don’t know really. Different people every week, but always the same different people.
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The above is typical of interviewee’s social habits and goes some way to describe the key sites and the social institutions of the area. The house party is obviously a key area for meeting people, as are a number of other sites in the locale; namely the numerous pubs and cafés. In terms of association, the nature of friendship is quite plural, with both individuals above explicitly pointing out the fact that they had different friends for different occasions and were quite well ‘networked’, in terms of being well woven into the social fabric of the locale. Friendship also seemed to be heavily based on the use of public space, more so than intimate space. In fact this concept of extreme socialising seemed to be a large part of the locale in general. When asked to describe Fremantle, notice how Beth, below, continually equates the high levels of sociality within the area itself:

Steve: Tell me about Fremantle.

Beth: The good thing about Freo is it’s quite sociable. As soon as you get to know people you are included and not so alone.

Here I go into town and meet people and just join them.

Steve: How did you meet people here?

Beth: Through work and through the parties. Parties are good in that they are an alternative to nightclubs, there’s no nightclubs here for young people, but Freo parties are for all ages. It’s a bit superficial after a while, but it’s where you get to meet people, if they’re not too drug fucked that
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is. It’s unique about here; you can just go to a party. In bigger cities you can’t do that.

Steve: You prefer this to big cities?

Beth: Yeah, more people that live by themselves that are lonely in the city. People can do what they want, but could be more lonely if on their own. But once you know people you go out and meet your friends. And it’s easy to know people here.

Steve: So you like it here then?

Beth: Yeah, Freo is good like that, you couldn’t meet so many or have such interaction in a big city. It’s more isolated cos it’s more fast living. But here in Freo, cos of the party scene, you get to meet all sorts.

There is a definite theme of sociality that, for the above interviewees, seems to define the place. And it is not just the volume of activities but also the openness of the local crowd and the fact that there is a regular meeting place - the house party - where they socialise.

Though more an institution than a space, house parties make up a vast majority of the inter-group, or community, activity in Fremantle. Typically these events are organised by members of a household to celebrate an occasion (birthday, housewarming, houseleaving) and consist of clearing furniture out of parts of the
The Fremantle house party community

house to accommodate guests, possibly decorating the house and possibly providing some entertainment, which is usually a DJ, though can be bands and other performances. These events vary in size from forty to three hundred people and, depending on the drugs consumed and those involved, can go for five to twenty four hours. Generally they are open invite events, the logic being, that if someone has heard about a party then they are obviously connected to the correct social network and therefore the right ‘sort’ of people to have at the event.

Usually, one either enters the party with a group of friends, or immediately joins a group of friends/associates, then moves out into the party to socialise with others. It is the experience of myself and others that towards the middle or end of the night there is quite a lot of random interaction with strangers, due no doubt to the drunken state of the participants combined with the air of familiarity one has after being confined to a reasonably small space for a number of hours. The importance of this site cannot be overstated, and I believe that this is one of the key sites, or nexus, of the community; where through regular meetings within a finite area, social ties emerge that bind individuals to the rest of the community. What follows is an example of a one such party.

A house party on Parry Street

Beth was particularly fond of the ‘doof’ scene; a collection of individuals who organised rave style parties in the forests surrounding Perth. She was also very well informed of local parties and art exhibitions. She texted and told me of a
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party on Friday night at a local art studio. One of her friends was DJing and she said it would be a good example of the eclectic nature of Fremantle parties.

The party was on the corner of Parry Street and High Street; essentially in the heart of Fremantle, which, by itself would have made for a large turnout. The front had a wheelchair ramp that led up to the front door. This was lined with people talking and smoking. Lex, an informant, was there talking to some friends. There were roughly fifteen people in this area. I quickly greeted individuals I knew and walked into the main area. Two friends who had texted earlier were waiting at the front door, they wanted to know whose party it was, I told them it did not matter and we walked in together.

Just inside, there was a main room, which had roughly twenty people in it. It was dimly lit but had a large projector screen showing swirling colours, behind that was a room where instruments and a bar were being set up. There was also a DJ and roughly fifteen people dancing. To the right of this was a corridor where there were rooms with painted canvases. This, I found out later, was studio space for a number of resident artists. This area was partly blocked off and seemed to be for intimate and personal guests only (typically the hosts will have some private space for close friends where they will hide alcohol and/or drugs for the night). Walking back through the band room and the main room, there was an enclosed outdoor area that contained twenty people, who were mainly sitting on beanbags and couches, talking in small groups. After examining the separate spaces I went
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back to the front to talk to Lex. We talked about an earlier interview. He was very keen to talk about psychotropic chemicals as well as the social and spiritual significance of taking drugs. This form of conversation - debates on pop social-anthro-psycho-spirituality - is relatively normal for Fremantle but not so typical for Perth, where the conversation would have probably centred on popular culture such as art or music.

After this I went to the bar, which is uncommon at a party, but Lex later told me they had initially tried to make money out of this event, which is also uncommon. I spoke briefly to some people (strangers) next to me. These conversations were very dynamic and tended to last a minute or so. I made my way around the edge of the dance floor to the door. This took half an hour, as people were constantly stopping and talking to me, or dragged me into conversations they were having. By now the party was at capacity with a hundred people in the inside area, and roughly sixty people out the front and in the side area. A band was playing but not very loudly, more improvising for each other than playing for the audience. Personal space was very compressed, small groups were having conversations throughout the party. Lighting was minimal except for a small party lights and the projector in the middle of the room. People were starting to smoke inside, which added to the disorientation. It occurred to me that for quite a while I was standing on my own looking at the event around me, I spent roughly quarter of the night doing this. When I wasn’t, I was wandering between groups, joining in conversations that I overheard and being forced into conversation by the looks
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and comments of those around me. At one stage I sat next to an old friend, Andy, and spoke to him, then the man next to him started talking to us. We sat here, talking about societal norms, pop-psychology and other irrelevant topics for fifteen minutes: a long time for a party conversation. I eventually found Lee, my partner, and went outside with her.

At this stage I was starting to receive texts from others about asking what the party was like and if it was worth going, to which I responded positively. Eventually Bob and Sean showed up. These were both party regulars, I had seen them at almost every event I have been to. Common consensus regarding these two was that if they were at a party, then it was probably the best one of the night; as they made a habit of going to all the events on any one night looking for the best. When I saw them, they both thanked me for telling them about the event and disappeared into the party.

By midnight most of the individuals in the space were quite drunk, conversations were very loud and the DJ had made the set louder to compensate. A vaudeville hula-hoop stripper got up to perform, followed by a belly dancer. This was slightly unusual, but given the size of the party was not unexpected. The majority of the party crowded into the main room to look at this. The spectacle lasted half an hour and was followed by other performers who gradually lost the interest of the partygoers until the performance space reverted back to a dance floor. I left at two am, by then the semi-outdoor area contained forty people, all of whom were
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having drunken, seemingly in-depth, conversations. The dance floor in front of
the band had forty people dancing on it, and another thirty people around them,
looking at the dancers, nodding their heads to the music and maintaining very
brief conversations. The rest of the space was still quite full with very drunk and
stoned individuals. As we left we said goodbye to people who we knew, slowly
walking through the space to the front door. This took twenty minutes, due, once
again, to getting involved in numerous small conversations. Outside there were
groups of friends having conversations and Lex was still there. I arranged to meet
him for a follow-up interview the next day, and then said goodnight.

**Commentary on the party**

Lex, a mid twenties local musician was, until recently, part of a financially
successful music outfit playing in both Perth and Fremantle. Roughly three
months prior to meeting him the band broke up and from that point Lex removed
himself from the social milieu, rarely coming out for events. I was introduced to
him by another musician who suggested that, as he grew up in the area, unlike
most people at parties, he would have some interesting long-term perspectives.
Here are his comments about the above party.

Steve: Ok, tell me about the night at Parry Street.

Lex: I know all the guys that live there. They’re trying to make it into an
art space with performances, like *The Bakery* in Perth. The guy
that’s running it is my girlfriend’s ex. and they were planning that
for about a month.
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Steve: So, how was it?

Lex: I was at home and I had a friend come to visit me that I used to live with. We went to the party together. I was happy not to see the same ol’ crew. There was a few of them there, but lots of new crew. I actually ended up getting arrested and then released for drink driving when I moved my car for this bird. But aside from that it was good. There were a few people out the front and I was out there for quite some time talking to mates and mates mates. I sort of got stuck there. By the time you rocked up I hadn’t even been inside. The conversation was very much “how have you been”. I haven’t seen these people in a while. I started speaking to about five people but more people kept arriving, and as I said, I sort of got stuck. I’m surprised the cops didn’t show up then and do something, ’cos we had a separate party going on out the front and they’re just around the corner. But I guess I was their sacrificial goat.

Steve: What about the dynamics of the party?

Lex: There was a lot of performance there. I had a look inside and there was a girl there with hula-hoops, and a band, I think. I just wandered around. I was pretty smashed. I saw people that I recently met, so I did that kind of “you’re here, how’d you get here or find out about the party” sort of thing, then went back outside to my old mates. At these things I usually end up just trying to find a
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comfort zone. The crowd noise gets to me but that’s from gigging so much. All my friends gathered in the same area, outside, cos we’re all musos [musicians].

Steve: Did you meet new people?

Lex: Not new new, or really new people, but not the conversation where I don’t introduce myself and they don’t and we just keep it there, otherwise you have to remember their name and there’s this ongoing name remembering thing. I prefer nice and simple. So yeah, sort of new people. I got to know a couple of guys a bit better and probably got introduced to a few new crew, but nothing memorable. We had a good chat about society and alcohol didn’t we?

From both the description and the interview it is clear that the party is quite a dynamic and, to a large extent superficial, affair. My own comments about the number of brief conversations, as well as Lex’s comments about not exchanging names, show the volume of connections that can be made at these events. Aside from a very small number, most of these conversations do not go anywhere, or produce any tangible effect, such as generating a long-term friendship. However, regardless of the outward pointlessness, there is the expectation that individuals will talk to strangers.
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In Lex’s account, he almost apologises for not talking to strangers enough, confessing that he prefers the company of his old mates, but at the same time he does say that he did meet new people. In my account I show, a number of times, how I was either accosted and essentially talked \textit{at} by people, or found myself in a situation where I was talking, quite openly, with people whom I had never met before. There is then a norm of talking to strangers at a party, a norm that is not only encouraged but also enforced (as the uncomfortableness of the shy, or my own reaction to being alone at an exhibition in the previous chapter is testament to). To not talk to people, is to be left out of the party, which shows that it is this norm of gratuitous sociality that makes a party. The interaction between relative strangers, who by the fact that they are at the party are deemed not to be a threat, creates the party, and without this occurring the party will not be deemed to be a ‘success’. As such, the party is one of the few places where sociality is both the means and the ends of the interaction; as such it is a profoundly significant resource for the creation of social and cultural ties, especially when the spectrum of groups it unites is considered.

Locally there are numerous, fairly discrete groups, operating in and around Fremantle. When asked to list these groups, Derek came up with the following.

Skater kids and emo kids and biker dudes and activist crew and hippy crew and Jesus gurus. And then there’s the beautiful people, the professionals, the old Freo musos, the funk clubbers and a few
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old punks. If you look at the whole community then there’s the African crew, the South Americans and even the old Italians. It depends on your perspective and where you go and what you consider to be Fremantle though.

Without entering into finite subcultural definitions of each group, it is suffice to say that the locale is reasonably diverse and contains a lot of different cultural and subcultural activity. Furthermore, the boundaries of these groups are quite fuzzy as individuals move between groups depending on the event. A point covered once again by Gary and Rhianna.

Steve: Are you in a core group of people

Gary: No, everyone I know is from different groups. It’s lonely, in that I’ve got good friends, but they’re not as connected as I am, they are only in one group. My experience of life is different, I can’t relate to them. And there’s less people that can relate to my way of being – being in multiple groups. It’s set me apart from other people, I can’t communicate with others who only hang out in one group.

Steve: How close are your friends to you?

Rhianna: (Laughs) I think with any group of friends there’s going to be people that you’re not really close to, so I have a core
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group of people that I consider to be really close friends,
and then there’ll be people that will be friends of friends or
acquaintances, not necessarily very good friends. Like
some people you trust and some you don’t, but you use
different people for different things. Trust and stuff is
irrelevant at a party.

Steve: How did you meet people?

Rhianna: Mostly through friends and then friends of friends and
acquaintances. I’m part of the broader Fremantle social
network. The circles within circles within circles thing. So
if I’ve got 8 friends, then one of them will have another 8
friends and you might know one or two of that group, then
one of them might have eight friends and you might know
one of them. It’s a conglomerate. A big bloody web,
especially when you start getting sexual relationships
entwined in that as well and you see or hear of them every
week at parties. There’s good friends that you hang out
with, then people that you hang out with for a good time.
So its different people for different occasions. But we all
know or know of each other.

The area then is not simply one community or singular group, but many operating
fluidly over the top of each other. And these groups at times come together and at
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other times remain separate. By way of showing how this operates, the following is a description of a night in July where we went to three separate venues for three very different events with each attracting a very distinct demographic.

Field notes: Three events in one night

Duke was a forty five year old male I had seen at almost every party I’d been to in Fremantle. I met him once outside of the party network and we had a drink together, but this didn’t work. He seemed too flat and not particularly interested in ‘normal’ daytime conversation. After that we left trying to be friends out of our relationships and simply remained party buddies; telling each other of parties in the area. I had roughly ten people like Duke in my phone book.

Duke texted me on Saturday afternoon about a possible party on James Street in Hilton; a suburb just East of Fremantle. I passed this information on to others I receive party information from, which was no doubt passed on to their party associates. Phil rang later. He was at a loss for something to do but suggested going to Mojos [an alternative music venue and bar in North Fremantle] for a punk gig. Later that evening he texted and told me that he was there with Andy and Alan. Pip also rang and said that she was going to the Swan Basement, a pub around the corner from Mojos, for a funk gig.

Lee and I got to Mojos at half nine. The front band room was reasonably full. A punk band was playing and this space was filled with younger, punk looking types. We went out the back to an old, smoke-filled, in-door garden with a
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decrepit, slanted and cigarette burnt pool table. Alan, Andy and Phil were playing pool and talking to each other. I talked to Alan about music, and to Andy about a long running conversation we have regarding community, while Lee found some friends at a nearby table. There were thirty other people in the back room, mostly sitting at the tables scattered around the place, clothed in American punk style fashion. Usually this space is quite socially dynamic, with people swapping tables and talking to those outside of their group, but that was not happening tonight, as the patrons seemed younger and somewhat unsure of themselves. Someone did talk to Phil for a while and took him off to meet their friends, but other than that we stayed in the small group. By now it was ten thirty, and it didn’t look like the gig was really going to achieve the critical mass to make it worth staying. Lee was getting bored and suggested we go to the party on James Street.

Figure 16: Punk gig at Mojos
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When we arrived there were fifteen people on the front veranda and heavy industrial music could be heard coming from out the back. Neil, one of Lex’s friends from the previous party, was there and said it was his birthday. We stayed here as a group, each group member speaking to someone at the party. Elinor and Penny (friends of Lee) came out of the party and joined us. I went inside to have a look. There were thirty people throughout the house and fifty out the back. Some were standing and some were sitting around a fire, all were talking. I found out later that the majority of these people were on magic mushrooms. This was quite a hippy/punk affair, with the majority of people sporting dreadlocks. The house was dirty with lots of empty beer bottles, wine casks [four litre boxes] and clothes lying around. All the furniture seemed to have come from verge side collections [thrown out furniture that students and welfare recipients traditionally recycle] and was in various states of decay. The ages of partons ranged from roughly twenty to forty.

I walked back to the front where the group I arrived with was still in one piece, but starting to merge into the greater sociality of the party. Alan and Lee had received texts telling them of another party and had decided to get everyone out of the house and over to it. Andy said that the other party would be ‘swinging’ as they were quite wealthy and held good events. After successfully decoupling individuals from their respective conversations we left. Elinor was with us in Lee’s car, while Phil and Alan went in Andy’s van. Neil was upset to see us go.
We arrived at the second party, it was being held in what appeared to be an old church, though it turned out to be a house. Inside was heavily decorated with food and light, the theme of the party turned out to be ‘decadence’. One half of the main room was devoted to an outrageous presentation of food; a chocolate fountain, wheels of cheese, olives, cakes, fruit and marshmallow sculpture. The other half of the main room held a 70’s style dance floor brought in for the occasion. There were sixty people inside and thirty outside. I knew ten or so people from previous events, including Sean, Bob and Duke, who had left the first party as it was too quiet, and another twenty by association. Once I had had a look around the party, I proceeded to talk to them about the earlier events of the night. Apparently it had been quite a hedonistic event, with a number of local personalities showing up. Most people here were over thirty, but some were in
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their mid twenties. Though conversation came easily I found it was harder to speak to people at this party. Andy informed me that most people there were Fremantle originals; born or having been to school in Fremantle, and were quite cliquey.

The groups we came in disbanded and we each went our separate way through the party, talking to people randomly. Eventually we all ended up in the same area, an ad-hoc bar, where half of the guests were drinking. All guests were finally moved here at two am as the hosts attempted to wind the party down. At this stage it was evident that a large percentage were on ecstasy and did not want to go home, resulting in many discussions about where to go next. Some patrons tried to organise an after-party, but consensus was reached that everyone who wanted to keep going should go back to the party on James Street, as they would be awake all night. We left the party shortly after this, dropping Elinor at her car then going home.
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The above describes the multiple groups that operate locally, the divisions and the fluidity between them and the way that the same institution - the house party - has been adopted and adapted by the many groups in the locale. Given that it was July, the coldest month of the year, the fact that there were three events on was rare, as usually it is one or two, but in the warmer months, November to March, there would be at least two, and more likely four events on over the weekend. Each event would be held by one of the groups, and the style of the event would reflect their personal tastes. So for example a hippy party would have drummers, fire-twirlers and reggae, while a punk party would be very drunken and loud. A professional’s party would play ‘house’ music and have a dress code, and a funk party would be more like a carnival. But all of these events would generally be
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open to the entire community, once the patrons understood the primacy of the hosts to impose their tastes onto the guests. So while separate groups exist, they do freely intermingle, and individuals in one group will easily socialise and know of others. It is in this way that the local community starts to be built. As the networks start to overlap and people move between groups, a commonality of communication emerges and the tenets of the locality get created. As Alan, a local journalist said:

Sure there’s fracturing in Fremantle, but there’s links between the groups. Some of my friends are quite close to some in the hippy crowd and I’d talk to them but they wouldn’t ring me up. I might get a text from one of them about a party. I gravitate less to them cos they have less direction, they have no occupation. They tend to talk about ethereal stuff that I’m not really into, but we do feel comfortable around these people, they are friendly and we operate in the same spaces.

There is then a norm of cultural difference in the place; a general acceptance of others that allows for multiple subcultural styles and identity templates. And it is this openness to diversity as well as the forced interaction at parties that brings these many diverse aspects of the community together, resulting in the creation of a common local culture. However, this diversity does not produce normlessness and Fremantle culture is not accepting of everything.
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Norms and values

In terms of an archetypical Fremantle perspective, Tom, a mid thirties actor, summed it best. In the extract from his interview below, notice the contradictions between diversity and homogeneity, acceptance and rejection, as well as his positioning of creativity and sociality over that of work and the mundane.

Steve: Tell me about your friends.

Tom: I know lots of people and I have some sort of status cos I know lots of people. Once you get to know people, common interests become apparent. It becomes a joy hanging out in the community with acquaintances that are like-minded. But in the city or ‘burbs, you’re cut off as you don’t have the comfort of familiarity, but if you’re social, put your hand out and smile, most people will take you up on your friendliness and courtesy; unless they’re a bunch of knobs like the rightwing, scared, naïve, freaked out, judging arseholes from the suburbs (laughs). They can’t communicate with others and aren’t hospitable.

Steve: So what makes Fremantle good?

Tom: Well, the festivals are happening everywhere now, and people seem to be mixing more, but not everywhere has the artistic community necessary to attract others. In Freo there’s lots of artists and musicians, and people like
knowing musicians, its very attractive. Freo also has spaces to go. It has hubs. It has clubs, bars and this brings people in and allows them to inhabit an area. You need the hubs and the ambience, gardens, architecture, traffic, but people are friendly here. It needs to be interesting and have all sorts of entertainment. People are attracted to this. It’s an affluent society. They want to relax after they make their money. And the more the working class sees the artists the more liberal they become.

Steve: Why has it turned out like that?

Tom: Freo was working class then became a beacon and space for fringe dwellers to come. Then the Mediterraneans came and made it a hub for people to connect. Freo is a little ‘cosm’. It doesn’t suffer from the same thing as in the ‘burbs. It’s got a community ‘cos of the cosmopolitan thing it developed. But this is everywhere now. So many places have space to hang out. It’s even going on in the ‘burbs. But people who move into the ‘burbs, don’t meet neighbours; they leave their suburb to shop. This makes places more individualistic and isolating. Freo is older; the community that lives here stays here, they move around a lot, but stay local. It is a very transient group though.

Steve: What are the hubs?
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Tom: Oh the parties definitely. It’s where everyone goes. I usually know forty percent of the party, sometimes less, but I want to get to know everyone else cos they’re “hip with it” or want to get to know others that are probably likeminded. Most people I know at parties are artistic, musical and political. The majority are likeminded, are open-minded, broad-spectrum and clued on to what is going on. They want to forget about the week, gossip, chew the fat and talk about bollocks.

This interview, one of the most telling of the research, points out quite a number of key issues regarding how the research group viewed themselves and how the community was constructed. The significance of socialising, for example, was quite evident. This was highlighted not only by Tom’s continued reference to socialising and his popularity, but also by his denigration of ‘workers’ and suburbanites; a point backed by the fact that the question “what do you do” is never asked at Fremantle parties (and rarely at Perth parties). This equation of work and suburbs with “rightwing, scared, naïve, freaked out, judging arseholes” essentially maps the community boundaries, maintaining a mythical superiority of creativity and socialising over that of ‘mundane’ existence. Essentially Tom is showing the self-righteousness and ‘othering’ (or making those outside of the group ‘strange’) necessary for the construction of communities, which will be covered in greater detail in the final chapter. But regardless of arrogance, the
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enactment of a left wing, spiritual, highly social, anti-authoritarian artist was noted as being quite significant to gaining entry to the community.

Another norm that emerged was one of social distance and autonomy, and this was heavily associated with a large focus on individuality. Most of the people I spoke to were adamant of their dislike for overarching regimes, preferring instead the relative freedom of a fluid, and to a large degree superficial, culture. Over their lives they had encountered communities or relationships that limited them and their development, leaving them with a distaste of being ‘locked’ into anything. Take for example the following interview extracts from both Alan and Derek. In Derek’s case he is talking about the difference between the tight social structure of where he grew up, followed by his preference for the less rigid social order of Fremantle. Alan’s covers his preference for the transient and momentary: the simple sharing of the moment, over that of developing any long-term commitment beyond the immediate. Both develop the same argument; a preference for independence and non-committal relations, but simultaneously a need for sociality, just not a type of socialising that generates high levels of reciprocal obligation.

Steve: What was social life like where you grew up (Newcastle, Australia)?

Derek: Was mainly unchosen. I hung out with most of the blokes I’d grown up with. Not your gentlest bunch of people. Most
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blokes were dodgy and bigger than me. Had some girls that used to go to the boats and entertain the gents there and come back with loads of drugs. I’ve seen blokes shot, had guns pointed at me, one of my mates killed some bloke ‘cos he got his girlfriend onto heroin.

Steve Why did you leave?

Derek: I went overseas for a year. I came back, but the people I was hanging around with were big druggies by then and I’d never chosen them as friends. I had different friends to them, and probably had more friends outside the group then these guys did, but they all stuck together and I didn’t want to associate with them any more. I knew them really well, like family. It wasn’t that they were bad people; they just liked their lives. It’s just the way it is. It’s like I was saying, we didn’t choose our friends, it just was, they were just the kids next door, there would have been about thirty of us. It made for some entertaining times. One time this fight started, some one started picking on some friends of ours and suddenly heaps of cars pulled up and sorted it out really quickly.

Steve: So no social anxiety then, you were protected?

Derek: Protected from outside the group, but half the time I had guns pointed at me was from inside the group, from friends.
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Nowadays I think about it as cultural, as a community group. They had their own ‘in-house’ laws about outsiders. If someone fucks up within the group, like fucking someone’s girlfriend, they deserve a beating. If you piss off the big bloke, he’s well within his rights to beat the shit out of you, cos he’s a big bloke. By the time I left there was heaps of politics. People were tied together by angst not because of friendship. I couldn’t stay and be me, so I left.

Alan: When I first went overseas I made a commitment to keep travelling. It’s that fleeting, sharing something with someone and then moving on. It’s that shared experience of the moment that I like, initially I shared addresses and numbers, but quickly realised that you don’t keep in contact, it’s just the way it is. I’m less impressionable in that way now, emotionally, and more willing to trust and share space superficially. It’s helped me to get through life

Steve: So you really like the superficial?

Alan: Like, in general, but especially in travel: unless you make a real effort to keep touch with people. It’s hard cos you meet a lot of people, all you want to do is to share a moment with them; you may not be compatible on any other level. And by extension it’s also true of the party scene in Fremantle.
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I’ve known people that have trouble continuing going to parties. They felt like they shared something with someone and see them afterwards and it wasn’t there, there was no recognition of that moment, but I don’t have trouble with this. Some people go through painful situations with this. They reveal something about themselves and it’s not followed up. But this is not a problem for me.

From a personal-history perspective we can see that, in both cases, there is a desire for freedom. Derek’s comes in the form of being able to select friendships and to escape the narrow but dense social experience. Alan’s comes in the form of a preference for transient relations, possibly coming from his childhood in a strict Christian community. But regardless of the foundations of these beliefs, both of these expressions occurred in one way or another in all respondents. In Mike’s case it was a desire to escape an overarching familial dominance. In Rhianna’s, due to her being both disabled and gay, to live in a less judgemental space with less prescribed roles. Elinor wanted to get away from what she saw as the “petty hierarchies” of the suburbs and Gary wanted to be in a space where he could be in many different groups simultaneously, as did Derek. So there is a demand for personal space, or rather a preference for the social bonds that do not absolutely bind. And this is not just maintained in terms of developing a personal biography, this ‘fear of commitment’, or lack of desire to get ‘close’ to people comes across
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in the physical interactions between people in the community. This point is
covered well by Rhianna:

There’s big fear of commitment in Freo, it’s the new C word. You
can’t say it. It’s the commitment phobia. I’m like that in a
relationship. I’m afraid of losing out on other things.
Everyone around here’s the same. They won’t commit, and if they
do it won’t be until the last minute and it can change in a second if
something better comes along.

Evidence of this was also observed in the temporary and transient nature of
relationships in the key social sites, where the majority of social contact is
superficial and rarely supported or followed up. In Gary’s interview below, note
the general transience of social intercourse how he will not even commit to calling
his girlfriend his girlfriend, preferring to call her his favourite instead. Also note
the insignificance of his interactions, as he laughs off the possibility of any of it
amounting to anything.

Steve: Tell me about your weekend.

Gary: Went to my girlfriend’s house. Shouldn’t call her that. Let’s
call her ‘my favourite’. We hung out for a little bit, had two
or three glasses of wine and socialised with the
housemates, but we don’t really go out with them cos
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they’re homely. Went in to *The Swan Basement*. I knew the people on the door so we just walked in and went through to the courtyard and there was a band playing. Lots of people in the courtyard; had a great vibe going on out there. There were too many tables and chairs and it got in the way. The band were playing really well, more people were arriving. I was dancing and nodding and saying hi. Had a couple of trips to the bar, had a bit of a dance.

Chatted to a friend at the bar. Two mates were on the dance floor, they called me over started dancing. The stage got more and more people on it, then the next band started again. They played a shit song first and lost me. But there was quite a few people there. Then stopped dancing and started chatting to some mates in the audience and members of the previous band. This lady was interested in getting me to play the lead in her short movie. Then, bit-by-bit, people were gathered around our table. By the time we were leaving I was the centre of attention. I’m used to getting this and get it deliberately most times, but this time I didn’t look for it, it just happened. Three or four people were saying “I’ll ring you next week, we’ll do this and that”. They were like “you’re the man” (laughs). The girlfriend was getting shitty with the attention. Someone
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was inviting me to parties, another to act, someone else
wanted to write a book with me or something.

Steve: How much of this will happen?
Gary: Oh … none of it (laughs).

From this it is evident that commitment is not appreciated or wanted. Individuals
are keen to socialise and have fun, but do not want to be obliged to do anything
outside of what they themselves want. This was a hugely significant finding that,
as with the previous themes, will be covered in a later chapter. However, the
power of superficiality and non-committal seems to be in the way that it
simultaneously allows for individualisation and community, or community
without the reciprocal arrangements that would be expected of typical community
arrangements.

In terms of norms and values, the segment of individuals spoken to have shown
that while the key tenets of Fremantle are to maintain an open, diverse and
creative culture, these are actually enforced, making the idea of an open society
questionable. On some level individuals must be seen to be creative. They must
also show some signs of distinction from ‘mainstream’ culture, be it in a political,
cultural, social or spiritual way. Another norm is that of diversity, where
individuals must, on some level, have an appreciation of the surrounding cultural
milieu. Resulting in world music, traditional ‘ethnic’ clothing and organic food
having a high popularity locally. Generally anything ‘left-of-centre’ is viewed
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positively, but it is a very typical and normalised ‘left-of-centre’, one where anything outside of this conception is not allowable.

On a final note, there is the norm of reserved commitment and the normalisation of superficial dialogue, where individuals were forced to refrain from ‘deep’ conversation. As will be shown later, this type of conversation creates the bridges necessary for information to traverse large volumes of people and to quickly move through the community. It also keeps the individuals both connected, and thus part of the community, and simultaneously removed from rings of reciprocity, thus enabling individual autonomy. However, the issue of reciprocity is complex, as on one hand there is a demand for individual freedom, but on the other a desire to engage in the greater sociality of the locale. And regardless of the ‘depth’ of conversation, some form of reciprocity is always involved; even if it is simply an agreement to remain distant. What follows then are some illustrations of how reciprocity and support are dealt with within the community.

Reciprocity and support

Generally the support provided by the community was viewed neutrally; with interviewees illustrating both how they were supported by the community and how they were not. Typically, community support was seen as purely social, that is where individuals felt that they had friends to socialise with, but not necessarily to deeply support them or to provide financial assistance. Sean, below, was a classic example of this. A number of drunken incidents at his home resulted in him being evicted, arrested and having to hide under his house for two days.
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While this was ongoing he refused to involve his friends, regardless of his need for physical, emotional and financial assistance. It transpired that a number of Sean’s friends knew of his predicament, but felt, as they were not asked to help, that they should not get involved, lest they embarrass him. This is Sean’s justification for not asking for help.

Steve: Why didn’t you call any one? Why didn’t you call me?

Sean: You can’t show up with all your baggage (emotional issues) and bullshit. You can’t get party crew to fix your shit, that’s not what it’s about. I couldn’t get people to come all the way over here just to hear me whinge. I looked like shit, I was crying, you know? I didn’t even have any beer! I mean, what the fuck is that? That’s no fun! People don’t want to deal with that.

Though quite dramatic, and to an extent unrealistic, this perspective towards community support was actually exemplary, though not typical. More mundane representations of the norms regarding support are presented below.

Lex’s description of his friendships is quite matter of fact. In it he shows how the superficiality he extends to those on the outer rim of his friendship group is ‘normal’, and actually useful as it maintains ‘fun’ social relations. He also shows how ideology, or rather the cultural norms of the community, ties these
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individuals together. Rhianna on the other hand gets quite emotional about the lack of support she receives from the community, but is also adamant that it is functional, as it allows her some level of support, which is still better than what she receives from her family.

Steve: Are your friends close?

Lex: Yeah. There’s a good bond between a few of them, closest friends are the ones I’ve worked with a lot. There’s a saying that goes you can only have 5 close friends, this rings true for me. I’ve got a few core mates that I see a lot, and the rest are quite superficial. I’m not saying superficial as a negative thing by the way, its just having fun, it doesn’t have to get deep and meaningful all the time.

Steve: Can party relationships get deep and meaningful?

Lex: Yeah, but not in an emotional way. It has a lot to do with their belief systems and my own. I tend to go better with a belief system I understand or relate to. A belief system is on the surface, generally it’s about political and social beliefs, then underneath it’s about spiritual and metaphysical beliefs. You touch on this sort of stuff at parties and its nice, yeah, but not in an emotional way, you just share a common ideology.
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Steve: How important are your friends?

Rhianna: My friends are very important in my life, I think more important than my family in my life, cos … I … yeah. I think friends are in some ways more important than family, in terms of consistently being a sounding board, cos I don’t really have a close relationship with my mum and my dad lives down south. So in terms of spending time together and discussing ideas, then yeah it’s mostly my friends.

Steve: So if you’re going out socially is it with this group a lot?

Rhianna: Yeah, but it changes, it’s quite fluid. Some people won’t be going out at sometimes, and others will. So among the group it can change depending on what’s going on in their life in that particular weekend.

Steve: And there are ‘deep’ feelings there?

Rhianna: Well … sometimes, with some of them. Sometimes they let you down and sometimes they don’t. Sometimes it’s superficial and sometimes its not. You know, sometimes I think that everyone I know is fucked. Some of them are so destructive. I see Phil as a person who drinks too much, socially and emotionally. I see how he gets into a ranting phase and how he places so much emphasis on being social, but I guess I have to overlook stuff just to get along … It’s really messy [she is becoming obviously physically upset]
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… When you really break it down there’s really a lot of things I’m not happy with in my community. I mean there’s some really good points about Phil, but he gets very abusive, but I tend to overlook it cos he’s a friend. It doesn’t make it ok, but I focus on the good side of him. But maybe its cos I’m not living in normal community. I expect conflict in family and friends, it’s not right … [crying] … I’ve been here before … [visibly upset, calming down]. We all live in the same place. Maybe Freo is the community and the people in it run in different circles. There’s only 2 degrees of separation here, there’s so many circles. Everyone is strangely connected.

Steve: Sounds difficult.

Rhianna: Yeah, I stick to my core friends. You keep doing what you’re doing for yourself. I’ll do what I do and keep going forward and that will attract others that are positive. This sounds very depressing, but its not. It is what it is. It’s still better than family.

So while the alienation of superficial ties may be a common factor, another is that individuals bolster themselves with a core of close friends whom they mainly associate with. The superficiality and high levels of sociality encourage high levels of association, but rarely do these eventuate in anything more than brief,
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though repetitive, encounters. As individuals, at least temporarily, remain in groups or collectives of groups. But yet, solace is found in these collectives, as Phil shows below, just being part of the crowd can be enough to make one feel supported

Community in Freo is strange. There’s times when I’ve been really happy, but still needed help and everyone shows up. Like one time I was moving into this house and had no furniture. Everyone showed up with something. I got a bed, table, wardrobe, side table and they all helped me clean the place and move in, excellent! But at other times, when I’m really lonely or sad, no one is there to support me. I’ve got a core crew, and they’re okay for light stuff. Actually, to be honest, when you need to party they’re always around, though this is getting less and less, but they’re there. The problems come when you need real help, but even then, someone will notice and invite you over for a barbeque or something. They won’t mention that you look like shit or are in bits, but they support you with fun, with showing that they’re there, and that’s good. It’s weird, it’s good and bad, but it’s better than being on your own, and the parties are good.

As mentioned, reciprocity and support in this community is complex. It does not achieve the standards one would expect of typical, gemeinschaft, communities,
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but yet it still provides individuals with a resource that they can utilise. Generally it leans towards more sociable support, or the comfort that can be found in knowing that there are groups of people that one can find commonality with. However, as Lex said, much of this was based on a “shared ideology”, with individuals being able to communicate freely due to having similar opinions. And, as Tom illustrated above, acceptance into the community was very much based on conforming to a quite specific set of rules.

In effect, what occurred was that community members took on a personality type, or a range of ideal expressions of self, that adhered to the public image of the locale. From interviews this image was represented as “friendly”, “artistic”, “open”, “diverse”, and “a real community” and these terms were used to actively construct an idealised Fremantle. Essentially there was an ongoing myth of the locale, where Fremantle was deemed to possess a quality that made it superior to other areas. This allowed for individuals to easily construct a shared image of the place, to easily develop locally recognised identities and also allowed the fantasies of community superiority and self-righteousness (evident from the likes of Tom, above) to develop into an ethos, or an ideology, of community.

Mike, who has travelled extensively, was particularly scathing of this idealised vision of the locale:
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I was at this party, right, and this girl comes up to me and starts going on about how great it is to live in Freo. She was saying ‘it’s a village’ and ‘its so artistic and creative’. But it’s in a city! It was a bloody suburban party! And she was adamant that the place was full of angels. You always get this in Freo, people think it’s this great place, but I don’t know why people want to live here. I mean there’s nothing here but the people.

However, at the same time he also recognises that, regardless of how the public imagination constructs a place, this construction will, on some level, be adhered to:

People outside Freo say you’ll smoke pot, play guitar and play drums. There’s quite a hippy element to the place, it’s the first thing people see when they arrive as it’s not part of their own culture. But there’s lots of different people here, but they’re all connected in a mess. There’s a feeling that everyone knows each other even though they’re all different. But the funny thing is you do end up playing drums and smoking pot, regardless of who you are (laughs).

So while what epitomises Fremantle has been largely constructed, this is not to limit its affect. The local “ideology”, as Lex called it, or the idealised
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Fremantle, is largely what generated the common cultural space that united individuals. By performing the stereotyped Fremantle character, or adhering to its norms, so individuals were able to recognise each other and to find acceptance within the company of each other. And it is this that appears to be the supportive element of the community.

By generating a common set of norms and then constantly providing space for individuals to gather and enact these norms, locals generate a culture of mass sociality. The community does not assist in personal matters, but provides a space where individuals can feel part of a greater sociality, and, once the norms of the locale are performed, offers them a sense of belonging, relief from loneliness and a very active social life.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has been an attempt to describe a segment of the social activity in Fremantle, and more generally to show the workings and norms of another urban community. This has not been a complete picture or one that is seamless, as there were many omissions that, for the sake of understanding and brevity, have been deliberately left out. There were also many contradictions within the study, making for a difficult and at times conflicting account of activity and identity within the group. At times this group were adamant that their local area was a bohemian idyll and at other times a gentrified, bourgeois enclave. Sometimes they said that their social life fulfilled them and at other times did not. Sometimes they felt they had support and at other times were completely unsupported. They
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simultaneously hated but condoned gossip, drunk behaviour, promiscuity and drug use. They strived for individualism, but within a framework of local cultural acceptance. This list of these contradictions is near endless and, as illustrated by Lex, below, shows the contradictory nature of community rhetoric.

Steve: Tell me about Fremantle

Lex: Freo can be enveloping. The positive side is that it’s a creative area and there’s heaps of people about, but don’t know if that’s really the case. Subconsciously it’s an art community, but it doesn’t really feel like that. It’s no more artistically creative than any other town. The local council milks this. It’s very political and it’s very expensive to live here. The whole town is changing. I really like it here cos of the art and music and stuff, but I wont be able to live here much longer.

Steve: It sounds a bit like you are torn about your opinion of the place.

Lex: I don’t really like Fremantle that much at night. It’s disgusting. I can’t think of a worse place to be after midnight. It’s so small, you see the whole street right there. I use to think Northbridge was bad. I done a lot of busking and I’ve seen extreme violence. There’s no visible police presence. I’ve seen gangs of up to twenty pissed kids
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thrashing the place like a fucking war zone. People stabbed in the face with glass bottles, but what do you do? It’s home.

However, regardless of the apparent inconsistencies, there is a perceived natural order to the area; one that involves many different types of people, with many overlapping networks operating within a matrix of local understanding. This localness involves some form of neo-bohemian existence, be it an attempt at authentic expression of personal development, a commercialised and sanitised interpretation of it, or something in between. Together with this is the idea of overt sociality, or consistent hedonism, where the emphasis is placed on the recreational over that of a working life. In fact, a large amount of effort went into adapting the recreational to become working life, or at least to appear as if work was recreational. To a large extent the community was built around ideals of self-indulgence and the networks that came from high levels of socialising within a limited space. The constructive aspects of this were that common rules, norms and mores could travel quickly across the community, but the destructive aspects were the alienation and transience that sometimes accompanied such activities.

Essentially this chapter contained information defining aspects of community interaction and provided clues as to its operation in Fremantle. The following chapters will continue with analysing the information from the two ethnographies to discuss the mechanical, social and cultural practices that go about making these
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urban communities operate the way they do. In doing so the contemporary
meaning of ‘community’ will be explored, as will how the social ties generated in
this milieu go about generating the ambience and cultural logic of contemporary
communities.
Chapter 7: Social structure and the relations of individualised urban community

Introduction

In his text on ethnicity and racism, Steve Fenton said that communities, when labelled from outside, are usually not communities at all. In this event they usually comprise of a set of individuals who have been categorised as similar, based on some ethnic or cultural feature (Fenton 1999: 12). Using this logic he goes on to critique sociology’s attempts to tackle the issues of race, as most definitions of ethnic groupings are simply categorisations, and not expressive of the lived reality or the complexity of the social system. The same reasoning can be applied to studies of community, where, as ethnographers delimit social activity to a finite set of practices, individuals and locales, so a community is essentially brought into being or constructed (Clifford 1986). It could be argued that the previous chapters were guilty of this ‘creative framing’, or of essentially manufacturing a community out of nothing, as the ‘typical’ markers of community were not obvious. Group bonds were multiple, fluid and short lived, relations were generally superficial and there was little in the way of reciprocity or support. From this perspective the ethnographies were not community studies at all, but more like disparate collections of random people, presented to appear as a cohesive community. But at the same time these organisations did have many of the markers of community about them, such as regular meetings, common cultural perspectives and norms, in-group and out-group schema as well as gossip and
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other communication mechanisms. And while not defining a community, these phenomena are symptomatic of the sorts of social activity occurring within a community. So while they are not necessarily typical communities, they are still communities, just not as one would expect.

However, this is only from a gemeinschaft perspective, where the move from idealised pastoralism to urban sociality led to the breakdown of close relations and to an essentially anti-communal experience (Wirth 1938). Evidence of the uptake of this perspective can be clearly seen in earlier ethnographies of Western cities, where, regardless of their finding tightly knit communities, the authors posited them as inherently dysfunctional, resulting in alienation or ineffective socialisation (Park, Burgess et al. 1967; Merton 1968; Cohen 1980). To carry on this theoretical position would see the researched communities as, once again, not typical of ‘traditional’ community, and therefore of little worth. But if these communities were viewed from a different perspective, one that was not so entrenched in the duality between urban and rural life, then possibly this position could be changed to a far more productive one. And it is this that this chapter sets out to do.

The aim of this chapter is to reframe the idea of community as not the opposite of urban life, but as an inherent part of it. It will do this by using a number of devices. The first repositions community by placing it within a city that contains numerous communities operating simultaneously. The effect of this will be to
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show community, not as singular or static, but as partial, fluid and to a large extent defined by the relations with other communities. With this perspective, the idea of community as anything that is completely coherent, or whole, dissolves into a position where it becomes just one of many, with individuals spending time between them. This creates a map of community that, as opposed to being a core element of individuals’ lives, instead becomes elective and multiple, with people spending time between many different groups. This essentially works around the belief that the city is not capable of producing community and that individuals are isolated due to this, and instead shows how a more typical view of the city is that of a social milieu made of multiple subcultures and communities interacting (Fischer 1975).

The second device for repositioning the concept of community is that of the personalised community. This concept tries to do away with the belief that community is an overarching mechanism and that it involves an entire population in a common and homogenised social structure. Championed by Barry Wellman, this view of community sees the individual as the centre of their own network of both prescribed and elected relations. This does not mean that they are a community of one, but that their social habits, and therefore social groups, are quite particular to that individual (Wellman 1988). What this does is to open up the concept of community further still, effectively doing away with the necessity of any common group logic or order. By taking on this perspective the outwardly
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fractured and fluid nature of the researched communities can be explained as essentially typical urban social patterns.

What follows then is a five-part illustration of how the communities operate. This includes: a) a conceptual map of the city as a set of fluid social relations between many different subcultures; b) an analysis of how the communities can be seen as collections of individuals’ personal communities; c) an illustration of how these personal communities come to form larger social structures; d) a description of the social spaces where these community relations occur, and; e) a description of the types of relations that occur in these spaces.

The last section is particularly significant as it shows how, much like the work of Sennett (1974) and Simmel (1950a), the superficial relations defining much of the interaction, and arguably being a signifier of the communities’ dysfunction, are actually the key practices that support such a large and diverse group. Here, both superficiality and gossip will be shown to be hugely significant in the maintenance of community ties and common norms of behaviour. Superficiality is effective in that it allows for social distance, or autonomy, while still involving the individual in a communal event, and also in that it maintains a generalised and effectively ‘open’ conversational norm; allowing access to many different types of people. While gossip functions to spread norms of behaviour, as well as to pass on information, of people, events and cultural shifts, to others. Both of these, traditionally negatively viewed, communication norms will be shown to be
Social structure and the relations of individualised urban community productive in the formation of community ties and very significant in the generation of the reciprocal gregarious sociality that embodies both communities.

In sum, this chapter aims to show the reader the structure and the relations of the studied urban communities. It shows how, rather than being singular or static, the communities are formed out of the interaction of multiple subgroups and also how they are fluid and polythemic. It also shows the spaces where these groups come together and how the spaces are used to generate both similarity between users and distinction from the surrounding social milieu, or to generate “communitas” (Turner 1969). Finally it examines the nature of weak ties and superficial connections, showing how, rather than being inherently ‘bad’, in terms of generating shallow and pointless social connections, they are actually a key part of the social repertoire of the city’s inhabitants and supremely significant in the development of contemporary urban communities.

a) Sociality in the city: cities as products of multiple communities

Theoretical positions on the city have varied greatly and been quite dependent on the theoretical camp of the observer (Pahl 1975; Castells 1996; Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2000). Structural functional perspectives typically examined the boundedness of the city, as with Robert Park (1967), where the city was construed as a set of discrete social spaces marked by a political boundary. From within this school of thought there were also viewpoints that were directly related to the
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social health of urban life, such as Wirth’s rather pessimistic view, where the city was the:

[s]ubstitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of neighbourhood and the undermining of traditional basis of social solidarity (Wirth 1938: 20).

Louis Mumford was far more optimistic, where, rather than the city leading to the ruin of modern man, it was the place where:

[t]he diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus, with gains in both social effectiveness and significance. The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. (Miller 1986: 104).

There is then quite a disparity of perspectives on the order, or disorder, of the city. Where from one aspect it is, socially, the root of all evil, distancing people from their traditional roles and relations, but from another, it is the place where the multiple strands of life come together to generate new and enriched public culture.
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However, it is the use of the city, and its rhythm (Lefebvre 1996) combined with its size and volume, both culturally and geographically, that make the city what it is (Amin and Thrift 2002); that is, an outwardly chaotic socio-cultural space, involving multiple and varied interaction, that produces a fluid form of social order.

There is then a primacy on sociality within the urban space, where comings and goings of people within the urban environment generate the intensity, the peculiarity and the vibrancy of urban environments. To a large extent the city is the sum of the social interaction that goes on within it. It is generated partly through the work of architects and engineers whose urban designs push large numbers of people together into limited space (Hannerz 1980: 243). But culturally and socially it is made through the movements of the individuals inhabiting it, moving through it and generating relations specific to that place (Massey in Blokland 2003: 9). So the city, while physically being the sets of buildings and roads, socially and culturally is the effect of mass sociality in a dense environment.

In his *Subcultural Theory of Urbanism* (1975), Claude Fisher points out the inadequacies of the Chicago School, ‘ecological’ position, on cities. Suggesting that the effect of dense urban living is *not* detrimental, but actually increases the amount of cultural and social variance, or ‘unconventional’ behaviour, in the city. His key argument is that, as cities grow they begin to define separate communities
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and subsystems to accommodate its diverse inhabitants, and these subsystems end up producing a range of cultures, which effectively become the public cultures of the city. So when a critical density of living is achieved, what emerge are numerous economic, political and cultural subsystems. And it is the intermingling and separation of these subsystems, not an overarching community norm, that generate the “urban mosaic” (Park, Burgess et al. 1967). This style of urban analysis begins to show the city as a multiplicity of communities that do not necessarily integrate, but yet create a cohesive urban environment and as such is inherently productive. And by viewing the city as a system of interrelated subcultures we can move away from attempting to understand it as anything coherent, in terms of a singular community, and instead replaced it with multiple overlapping communities.

What this implies is that there is not a single, dominant culture or set of norms operating in the city, instead it is comprised of many differing perspectives, and it is essentially this that generates the freedom of the city (Sennett 1994: 155). This is the ‘creative space’ that Richard Florida describes, where without the limiting discourse of strong social capital, individuals are more free to define their own communities, select their own cultures and become involved in whatever aspects of their locality they wish. And it is through this freedom that they are better able to express themselves, be creative and mix with other creative individuals (Florida 2002). What is being defined then are not only multiple communities interacting
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in the same locale simultaneously, but individuals being part of the many communities at the same time.

Once again, this flies in the face of traditional ideas of community, in which individuals are assumed to be part of one, and only one, community. However, this singular perspective does not concur with views on the social identity of the individual. Goffman (1959), for example, quite clearly demonstrates the multi-facetted nature of identity, by illustrating the ways in which various contexts will bring certain aspects of an actors identity to the fore. In terms of selfhood, though individuals may maintain a coherent self-image, this image is multidimensional, poly-vocal and very reliant on social context. More contemporary authors similarly argue for the conception of selfhood to be seen as multiple, flexible and fragmented (Elliot 2001), and rather than the individual being conceived as having a singular and persistent conception of self, what would be more apt would be to view an individual’s selfhood as multi-themed, complex, and perpetually shifting. If this plural view of the self is accurate, then it is also reasonable to assume that individuals are involved in multiple communities and not just the singular conception of ‘classic’ community studies.

With this in mind we are able to start conceptualising individuals as being involved in many communities simultaneously, and these communities to be intersected, overlayed, subsumed and altered by other communities, producing an individual who is perpetually shifting allegiances and identification per their
Social structure and the relations of individualised urban community involvement in these communities. And when taken with the large number of individuals in an urban environment, what we start to get is an image of perpetual motion, in terms of both the individuals’ group association and the enveloping urban social milieu they are surrounded by. From this perspective the city becomes a complex set of social interactions comprising of multiple intersecting and overlayed communities, networks and socio-cultural groups. And making up these groups are individuals who are involved with many of these communities.

The city then can be seen as a social milieu made of multiple, overlapping and intersecting, groups. And as individuals are part of a number of these groups (per their ever changing personal interests), the boundaries of these groups are fuzzy and membership is fluid. It is this conception of the city that Hannerz defines, one where it becomes the sum of individuals’ relations. They relate to each other through their roles, but, as individuals have many roles, the relations they have with each other are continually shifting, and as such the communities they form are both plural and ever changing. But regardless of the dynamic state of urban sociality, it still forms a coherent culture, one that becomes synonymous with city life.

The city, for our purposes, is (like other human communities) a collection of individuals who exist as social beings primarily through their roles, setting up relations to one another through these. Urban lives then, are shaped as people join a number of roles
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together in a role repertoire and probably to some degree adjust them to each other. The social structure of the city consists of the relationships by which people are linked through various components of their role repertoires (Hannerz 1980: 249).

Hannerz’s perspective on what comprises a city is an individualised one, where instead of one overarching set of norms being imposed on the city’s inhabitants, what occurs is that through the collective negotiation of individuals, and their various roles, a multiplicity of norms emerges, and this multiplicity comes to be the culture of the city, or the “background of meanings shared in the wider cluster” (Hannerz 1980: 289). So while there are local cultures and communities, and individuals that adhere to these sets of norms, it is also evident that the building blocks of these systems are the movements and relations of individuals. And it is this concept of the individual as the centre of community, or rather, “communities as personal networks” (Wellman 1988) that will be used to construct the arguments in the rest of the chapter.

b) The networked individual and individualised communities

Barry Wellman’s studies of East York, an old inner city suburb of Toronto, gave him the data to suggest that the community was not as theory would have it. Community, he said was not, as Bauman was suggesting, irrecoverable and mythic (Bauman 2001). Neither was it, as Gans (1962) or Jacobs (1961) were suggesting, ‘saved’, or continuing to exist in its idealised, essentially rural, form. Instead he saw community as liberated from traditional limitations. By this he
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meant that community was not as concrete a formation as one would imagine, community was not exclusively local or involving of family, it was potentially short term, potentially highly mobile, multiple; and most probably weakly linked. (Wellman 1979: 1206). Community then, as Wellman saw it, was extricated from locality, kinship and singularity, generating a concept of community that is mobile, multiple and networked over wide areas; or what Amin and Thrift called “distantiated” (2002: 52).

Another of Wellman’s contributions was his Different Strokes from Different Folks (Wellman and Wortley 1990) observation; that different people provide different forms of support and occasionally providing no support at all. The basis of this was the earlier finding that only small percentages (20%) of his study group were involved in networks that were singular and densely connected (Wellman 1979:1215). Instead he found that the majority of individuals were connected to multiple groups and these groups had varying functions. In fact the strong, and therefore presumably reciprocal, ties of close friends and family only make up for 50% of respondents contacts. The rest were ‘weak’ or purely social ties with little in the way of support. He also showed that the most significant interaction occurred within these unsupportive social groups, with 58% of all interactions being through group milieus such as local parties and social gatherings (Wellman and Wortley 1990: 571), showing that strong and supportive links are not what define a social milieu, or indeed, a community.
The last of Wellman’s contributions to be considered here is that of the personalised network (Wellman 1988). Essentially this is a schema where the individual is positioned at the centre of their personally defined network of social relations, in effect producing a personal proto-community. As mentioned this will be both elective and prescribed and will include family, friends and the array of individuals they are connected to. This model is based on the finding that no community is homogenous. Instead the greater, or “total community” (Delanty 2003: 21) is made up of a wide range of individuals, all of whom have distinct social networks. One implication of this model is that everyone will be involved in more than one group, based on their multiple affiliation of their everyday life. As far as belonging goes, the individual elects what groups he or she is part of and how much affiliation they have with each group. This is akin to Savage et al’s “elective belonging”, where individuals are in one way seen as highly individuated beings, but simultaneously part of social groups; deciding how much contact they have with the many surrounding communities (2005: 28). So from Wellman we have a number of points. Firstly, community is not tied to place or family group. Secondly, weak, purely social connections define much more of the community network than strong, familial connections. Thirdly, individuals are in many communities simultaneously. And finally, that community is best defined as the set of personalised network connections.

From one perspective the personalised network would seem to support the fragmented sociality of Bauman and others, as individuals move away from each
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other and define their own personal groups, but from another other, especially when the sum of these personal networks is considered, along with their interlocking nature, then we can see them instead as particles of the larger community. A point supported by Hannerz, above, and again by Wellman, who, quoting White, says about personal networks, “Their ties are not encapsulated in “decoupled little worlds” but are strands in the larger metropolitan web” (White in Wellman 1979: 1227). So what we have then is a marriage between the central concepts of individuality, the inherent fracturing of society that accompanies it, and community, where the individualised fragments actually go towards generating the communities. But what makes up this web? And what are the mechanisms that allow for communication across the diversity and multitude of groups in an urban environment? The answer is hinted at in Wellman’s figures on the volume of socialisation above. Where, from the high level of informal and group sociality (58%), we can see that it is not necessarily strong social ties that build community, but possibly the weak ones.

In his 1973 study of job seekers, Mark Granovetter found that those with high levels of informal, or weak ties were more likely to get jobs than those with high levels of strong ties. He showed that those individuals who had low-density social networks, where friends of that individual did not know one another, had access to the knowledge in more groups than those with high density networks, or networks where everyone knew each other (Granovetter 1973). In common terms, Granovetter’s research showed how having a wide set of friendships and
Social structure and the relations of individualised urban community associations was more conducive to effective information gathering than having, say, a close family or being part of a restrictive and singular close community. Similarly, Campbell’s (2001) work on health care and social capital, showed how ‘bridging’ (weak) social capital, or knowledge of others outside of one’s immediate family or community, aided in the resolution of conflict and the transfer of information far more effectively than did strong social capital. So while strong ties and dense social relations have their place, it appears that bridging, or weak, links are at least as significant for community and could actually be the key mechanism for the transfer of information between groups.

What we have from both this and the last section is a perspective of community that is quite different from that which is traditional. As opposed to having one community per location, in an urban environment there will be many communities operating simultaneously in the same locale. Community is not tied to place or kin and ultimately reflects the interaction individuals have with their surroundings, regardless of location or strength of association. Based on the cultural and social “omnivorousness” (Carrabine and Longhurst 1999) of contemporary individuals they will also be part of multiple communities, with each community fulfilling some aspect of the individual’s social life. As such, communities, or the set of associations that individuals have, can be best defined as personal networks. And the social ties that bind individuals to their personal networks, as well as bonding networks to other networks, are more generally weak than strong. Community then becomes a very complicated social structure, starting with the individual and
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then, as their connections come in contact with other personal networks, larger community structures emerge.

The next section will remain with the themes covered above and show how these organic and informal structures can be best conceived by drawing evidence from the earlier ethnographies.

c) The structure of community: how the community is organised

The ethnographic chapter on Perth opened with a review of a gig at *The Bakery*. The description of this event drew attention to the way in which the individuals involved did not seem to adhere to one particular style, instead attempting to construct highly individualised representations of themselves. This theme of individualisation and personalised culture continued in the examination of the merchandise in the shops, the individual preference for specific cultural styles and the choice of venues that subjects went to. There was such a large choice of product, style and location that all could potentially create a combination of cultural effects that was essentially unique. Ted Polhemus commented on this trend, calling it the “supermarket of style” (Polhemus 1996), and Steve Redhead defined it as the breakdown of subcultural narratives into consumer trends, with no uniting theme other than vast amounts of goods being purchased by an actively consuming youth market (Redhead 1990). A less pessimistic perspective was Carrabine and Longhurst’s *Mosaics of Omnivorousness* (1999), which not only showed the transformation of youth markets but also the overriding theme of
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individual distinction inherent in these purchasing patterns. According to this research, youth were becoming less labelled by subcultural norms and more heterogenous in terms of musical taste; preferring to have no ‘label’ and to freely choose their personal collection of music and culture. However, though tastes were becoming wider, and seemingly fractured or without a cultural order, it was actually this fracturing that was the order. The trend was that of individual selection of cultural product, which shows the same reflexivity that Giddens talks of in relation to contemporary identity construction (1991). So in the availability of diverse cultural objects, the heterogeneity of the individuals’ styles and the endless possibility for individual distinction, we can see that the theme of personal choice and individual agency is particularly significant across the Perth community.

In Fremantle, this emphasis on individual choice was noted to a lesser degree, with individuals generally adopting one of the few favoured local styles. But while the cultural effects were more homogenous, the choice of friendship groups, the freedom with which individuals changed these relationships and the dynamism and reflexivity involved in socialising seemed greater. Leading to the conclusion that rather than constructing their identities out of diverse cultural products, these individuals were constructing their personal communities to reflect identity and lifestyle choices. So in both cases the themes of personal choice and individualisation were particularly pertinent issues: in the first instance for cultural appropriation and in the second for social affiliation.
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In Wellman’s case he showed that the individual is at the centre of all connections and this individual makes connections based on his or her attachments, ideas of belonging, pastimes, careers, consumption patterns and so forth, generating a wide spread of social ties of varying strengths. As such, the social map of the individual community is highly personalised and, to a very large degree, specific to that individual. It is this idea of personal community that best defines the interactions in both Perth and Fremantle. Individuals were generating their own personal networks of friends and cliques and when these ties were layered over each other they began to map out the social operations of the greater local network. So, on a very real level, the individual is the basic unit of the community, and it is through their choices and interactions that the larger community comes to be formed.

The next step outwards from the individual is what subjects called ‘close friends’. In accordance with above, these were based on the personal biographies of the individuals as well as a product of the relationships around them, or what Rhianna called “friends of friends”. These collections came in a variety of forms, from individuals having one group of “core mates” to multiple groups of close acquaintances. The term ‘friends’, as described by respondents, was a very loose one, occasionally meaning long term associations and at other times very transient. But regardless of individual interpretations on the durability of friendship, all respondents had at least one group of close friends that they had
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regular interaction with. This group occasionally provided emotional support, but more generally was a base from which to explore the rest of their social environment. As such, these were the building blocks that brought people into the local social structure, and the small groupings that started to make communities out of separate individuals.

A key aspect of both studies was the way these small groups continually changed. They were quite dynamic in terms of the movement of individuals between them and as a result had unclear boundaries. This dynamism was also evident in terms of the number of groups that individuals were involved with. Even with the most rigid and dense configuration of close friends, interviewees generally had some association with a second or third group, and in the cases where the individual had higher proportions of weak social ties to strong, they could be part of, or on some level be involved with, five or six small groups. This movement between different groups was so common that some respondents said they felt uncomfortable with those who stayed in one group.

Gary: Everyone I know is from different groups. I’ve got good friends, but they’re not as connected as I am, they are only in one group. My experience of life is different, I can’t relate to them. And there’s less people that can relate to my way of being - being in multiple groups. It’s set me apart from other people, I can’t
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communicate with others who only hang out in one group. They’re so closed off and can only relate to each other.

In this statement there are hints at the demand for autonomy, the preference for being well connected over that of being deeply connected, and the desire not to wholly commit to anyone, but what it amounts to, in terms of social structure, is that the idea of the group, as anything static or whole, becomes unworkable.

What individuals end up with is not so much a solid group, or a gang, but what Spencer and Pahl refer to as a set of “friendship repertoires”, where they will have different friends for different occasions and the sum of these relationships go to define the individual’s personal network. As they say of their respondents:

[they] have broad friendship repertoires that included soul mates, confidants, help mates, favour friends and some purely sociable fun friends. They were aware of the way in which friends may drift apart, and their personal communities actually relied on some friends dropping off, or at least fading in importance so that other friends could blossom and come to the fore, becoming more committed but also possibly more demanding. Unlike some contemporary Jeremiahs, however, these reflexive participants did not consider their more light-hearted or short-lived friendships less valuable or worthwhile, but saw them as a vital counter balance to more serious
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relationship, referring to them as ‘low maintenance’ as distinct from
‘high maintenance’ friends, or as champagne bubbles, whose
company acted as a refreshing tonic (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 198).

What we have then are individuals with multiple sets of friends, each set having
one of a variety of functions. Some were close and some were distant but all were
meaningful and in some way beneficial, even if just for socialising.

So friendship is often temporary, shallow and purely social, but also sometimes
depth, emotional and committed. And in this statement we can also see the
revaluing of these temporary and outwardly shallow relationships; they are not
necessarily ‘bad’, or of less worth, and in fact can be more fun than other
relationships. The individual’s personal network then is a composite of all
relationships, and the majority of these will be a result of their personal
biographies. All collections of friends are then personal communities and distinct
from the personal communities of others. But if these societies are comprised of
personal networks, then what does this say of community?

When existing in isolation or in a social space that limits interaction outside of
one’s primary group, small groups seem to maintain some solidity; a point
supported by a number of respondents in their personal histories. But when the
social space allows and, as in the two study groups, seems to enforce, extra-group
socialising, then the idea of having a primary group of friends becomes less
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significant. What emerges instead is a semi-bounded system, call it a super group, containing within it the potentiality for numerous smaller groups to form and decay. And while the duration of the small groups are typically short, the ‘super-group’, or the set containing all other sets, is far less transient.

Though relationships and consumer trends changed with great regularity, what remained were a number of institutions, and it is these institutions, as well as individual’s interactions within these institutions, that Will Straw called “the scene” (2005: 478). The types of institutions Straw covers were the schoolyard, the club and the radio station, or anywhere that culture is disseminated en-masse. The institutions encountered locally were the house party, the exhibition, the shared house, and the live music gig, amongst others, all of which long outlasted the individual relationships that occurred within them, and all of which made ‘the scene’. The scene then was the set of places, events and cultures, combined with a set of interactions that occur because of them. As such the scene was a cultural geography, or space, culture and sociality combined, to produce a reasonably small but tightly knit social system (Bennett and Peterson 2004).

Typically when inquiring about the social make-up of the locality, informants would typically provide a list of the various scenes and then produce stereotypes of the individuals associated with that scene. The effect of this was, as per Fisher’s subcultural nature of urbanism (1975) to paint a picture of the community as a patchwork of numerous distinct subcultures. But in reality there was actually
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very little distinction between these different scenes, as both Anna from Perth and Alan from Fremantle suggest.

Weekends depend on what I feel like doing. *The Flying Scotsman*, or *The Brisbane* or *Lux*. They’re all different. One’s really chilled out, the other’s full of professionals. *Lux* is about cocktails, *The Scotsman* is about beer and *The Brisbane* is about arsehole fashionistas. I like to go to Freo to meet people, but I can’t get a crew together a lot of the time, and then it’s usually *Mojos* or *Little Creatures*. Sometimes I go to *The Hydey* [Hyde Park Hotel] for a punk gig or to catch up with some old friends. It just depends on what’s on, but that’s probably me personally, cos I like hanging out with so many different types of people. Not everyone’s like this, like you wouldn’t get some punk rocker showing up to *Bar Open*, or maybe you would, I don’t know.

And

There’s no real set pattern or style that we go to. There’s just an assumption that you go where everyone else is going. I’ve got old friends that I don’t see very often, but I know from looking at what’s on in Xpress [the local music press] or from what parties are on, who is going to be where.
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So rather then having a set music scene or a singular subculture, instead the social habits of individuals typically revolve around a number of scenes that generate a local circuit of events, places and groups. And it is this circuit, including the venues, the small cliques and scenes, and, most particularly, the intermingling of the many groups within the locale that generate the community. The following section examines some of these institutionalised spaces and shows how they all play their part in bringing the diverse groups together and how they aid in the construction of the wider social networks that define the research communities.

d) Places of community: the use of public and private space in developing community ties

In their book *Community Studies* Bell and Newby (1971) open with a wide range of perspectives on how to conceive community. There are so many perspectives covered in this overview, all of which are so widely different, that the term becomes so clouded as to have no central meaning at all. Margaret Stacy sees this theoretical discussion, of what community is and is not, as basically a debate around whether community means ‘belonging’ or is a reference to a geographical area. Instead she suggests that sociologists should be focusing on the institutions and their interrelations in specific localities, regardless of whether the locality is isolated, rural or urban (Stacy 1969). The benefits of Stacy’s position is that once the focus is on institutions and the relationships between them, then the analyst can focus on the functioning of the locale, how these institutions are maintained and the changes that occur within them. As such, this form of community study...
Social structure and the relations of individualised urban community becomes a way to maintain rigour across multiple studies (Bell and Newby 1971: 49). Contemporary ethnographers such as Will Straw (2005), above, have taken up this perspective, conceptualising ‘the scene’ as the interrelations between the local institutions and sociality and culture that these interrelations produce. From this perspective he manages to examine not only a scene, but the entire locale, including the numerous communities that operate within it, and the larger community that they are part of.

Using this emphasis on socio-cultural institutions, the following is a ‘map’ of the different spaces used by individuals to integrate into their local community. It begins with the smaller and more intimate spaces and works outwards towards those that incorporate the largest number and most diverse range of individuals. As such, the first space (the share house) is described as the most intimate community space, while the last (the institution of the house party) is shown to be the most gregarious, but also the most effective in terms of large-scale interaction and integration.

**The share house**

Typically the share house involved a number of people renting a house together; sharing the expenses and the living space of the house. All interviewees, bar one, engaged in this form of living arrangement; no one owned property and no one, with one exception, lived on their own. In terms of Australian context, this institution is best illustrated in John Birmingham’s *He Died With A Falafel In His Hand* (1994) and Andrew McGahan’s *Praise* (1992), both of which show how
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this type of living arrangement has become normalised in youth, student and alternative lifestyles. Internationally it is comparable with student digs (Kenyonm 1997), shared flats/apartments and artists lofts (Zukin 1982). The economic benefits of this form of living arrangement are that it allows the generally poor subjects to live in the inner-city environments. And without this arrangement, the community networks that were researched would not have existed. The social benefits, however, were also considerable.

The share-house was one of the few intimate, and reasonably long-term, social situations within the community. Through sharing the space with two or three others, the bonds between ‘housemates’ occasionally became quite strong, making the group into a small social unit. One effect of this was that the household had the potential to become a surrogate family for its members, occasionally providing physical and emotional support for each other, to the point where they became de-facto family.

I like the house, both the structure and the people in it. It’s the best share house I’ve ever lived in. The most supportive and with shared respect. It operates as a family. We help each other out. Like the other day Felix was doing a show and had a breakdown on stage. He went nuts and told all his mates to get fucked, but we talked him down; not his muso clique or his girlfriend, we did! His housemates!
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This level of support is not uncommon, and households often develop close relations, but it is also common for these bonds to decay once the living arrangements change and individuals move apart.

Another significant feature of the share house is the way that it initially introduces individuals to the community. Take for example Alan’s comments regarding how he ‘got into’ the Fremantle community.

A mate at work asked me to move into a house. His friends became my friends. I thought that everyone was close to him, but some people were at the end of their friendship, some at the beginning, some didn’t really know him. I found a common interest in talking about music and life. Some became closer friends than others. I became close to people that were nothing like me. Possibly shared a couple of interests but in every other way different, but maybe that was the attraction. So it was moving in, him having lots of people coming through the house, him having a regular core of friends, and me getting to meet them all in my own space that got me into Freo.

By moving into a pre-populated house and becoming part of the other housemates’ social network, Alan was introduced to the area and quickly made
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the connections necessary to establish himself within the community. Mike had a similar experience.

When I first came to Perth I lived with a group just outside Freo. We went swimming and went to parties together and sort of lazed around for a while getting to know each other. These guys had friends and introduced me to the party scene. We’d have sort of dinner parties there and have heaps of people around that would end up in guitars and singing.

So in both cases the share-house acted as a way to initially meet people and as a way to ‘find’ the rest of the community.

In terms of friendship, the house and the household came to signify a level of proximity that essentially defined friendship. If individuals met, were familiar with or were invited to someone else’s house, then they were considered to be close friends. Most interviewees used this terminology interchangeably, and they described their friends, not in terms of their deeply held beliefs or their careers, but more usually by the fact that they socialised in each other’s houses.

The significance of shared living space and cheap accommodation has been noted in many similar communities. For example, in Kostelanetz’s history of New York’s SoHo, the key factor in the area becoming a successful art community was
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the fact that there was cheap living and working space. When the area started to fill with similar minded people, who supported and socialised with each other, the social networks that produce community started to develop (Kostelanetz 2003). Lloyd’s history of Chicago’s Wicker Park similarly notes that the success of the locale began with its cheap housing and studio space, which, when combined with the availability of socialising space and public transport, attracted artists and other creative types to the area. As these individuals started to go to each other’s events and socialise in the locale, so the community was born (Lloyd 2006).

The share-house then is of tremendous significance for local community relations. Firstly, it provides a way for individuals new to the area to meet locals. Secondly, due to the local norm of visiting other households, it provides them with the space to meet friends of friends and therefore to gain entry into the wider community. Thirdly, given that the share-house was the most intimate and long-term social environment encountered in the research, it allowed individuals the time and space to create potentially long lasting relationships. Occasionally this closeness only lasted the length of the lease, usually six months or a year, but when one considers the personal network of an individual who is making three to four new close friends every year, and possibly ten or twenty other friends as they move from house to house, especially when these people are in the same community, then the connectivity of the community as a whole starts to become clear.
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However, household relationships typically become close friends and build cliques of similarly interested people, as such they can become quite closed (Cotteral 2007: 52). The spaces where these cliques become involved in the wider community, or where they become open, are in the more public spaces such as the pubs, clubs and cafes that they frequent.

**Clubs, pubs, cafes’ and galleries**

The significance of these spaces for social cohesion has been noted by a number of theorists. Clark, for example, shows how, far from simply being a drinking establishment, the pub was host to a number of social, political and economic activities, all of which were vital to the functioning of English society (1983). Bennett and Watson showed the pub to be a vital part of everyday life, in that it is a central entertainment activity as well as being constantly referred to as the focus of social activities in contemporary popular media (2002: 188). And Hay goes so far as to suggest that it is one of the key English social institutions (1986), a position supported by Jennings who sees its existence as key to the maintenance of communities (1995). The café has also been shown to be centrally significant to the development of successful urban communities, such as the turn of the century Parisian bohemians (Richardson 1969; Wilson 2000) and, more contemporarily, the Chicago ‘neo-bohemians’ (Lloyd 2002) both of whom utilised the café space as a social and a performative space; to meet with others and to enact the cosmopolitan artist. While the nightclub and music venue have been shown to be very significant to the development of youth social networks, as they simultaneously gather individuals together en-masse (Rietveld 1993;
O'Connor 1997), whilst segregating them into different styles (Malbon 1999). So while these spaces are outwardly primarily concerned with consumption, there is also a sociality intrinsic to their use, in that they generate the space to mix with others.

Ray Oldenburg called places such as this “thirdspaces”, by which he means places that are not private or public, but somewhere in between (1989: 211). The types of space he refers to are cafés, though he also makes reference to community halls and other public meeting places. These are the places where diverse sets of people can come to know each other and where different subgroups within the community can be in each other’s presence, effectively breaking down barriers and making for a less rigid, and potentially alienating society. He points out that these places have been crucial for the development of civilisation, as they lead to serendipitous meetings, open dialogue with others and a generally healthier population; as irrational fears, dissent and new ideas are discussed openly (Oldenburg 1989: xv). The structural commonality of these places is that they are open to the many diverse groups within the community, but they are also ruled by certain protocols of entry and decorum. An example of this would be, once again, the local pub. The pub is generally open to all, but they also have informal rules of behaviour, ones that welcome some types of customer more than others (Bennett and Watson 2002: 189). The nightclub or music venue could also be described as one of these sites, as they are supposedly open to all, and also conducive to socialising, but entry is also heavily policed by informal rules of
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cultural and social capital (Malbon 1999: 63). As such they are both places for mingling with the greater community, but also places where likeminded individuals are segregated from those outside, generating social spaces that are at once open and closed.

When taken singularly, these places provide both the space for mixing with the wider community, but also a way to remain aloof from it. In having this dual function they help to integrate the friendship cliques into the broader network, but also keep its members distinct from the general public. However, when this set of thirdspaces is taken plurally then they start to describe a network geography of how the community overlays the locale. They also show the socially relevant sites of the community, generating a map showing where the network physically exists and where it does not. So in terms of community construction, these places provide the space for socialisation with other groups, as well as the space for integration into the wider community, but also segregation of community members from non-community members. As such they are hugely significant in the formation of these communities, as they allow for individuals to mix, and thus develop social networks, in a common environment. However the most significant site for integration, socialising and constructing community ties was the house party.

**The house party**

The significance of this space cannot be overstated as it is possibly the key institution for connecting the multiple local scenes and subcultures of the locale
Social structure and the relations of individualised urban community into a common network. The party, unlike any other social space, is primarily for conversation. While other spaces may generate intermingling of groups, the party actively enforces this. And while the gig, club or gallery has the art or music as its focus and produces socially active spaces, the focal point of the party is socialising, a point made explicitly by Matt, below.

I go to *The Scotsman* during the day and at night sometimes too, but usually to *The Hydey* or *The Bakery*. Occasionally to Freo for *Mojos*, if someone I know is playing. But I prefer going to parties and houses, cos I don’t really like the pubs and clubs in Perth. People individually I love, but in groups they’re no good. At a party it’s better cos the groups break down. When you go out to a pub the music is always terrible and you can’t get in anywhere without queuing up for half an hour. I don’t mind going out to see a gig but I prefer parties. You meet more randoms. It’s expected more that you talk to other people there that you don’t really know. You don’t talk to randoms at pubs but you do at parties. If you watch how it’s represented in pop culture, you are almost expected to do the whole room. But in a pub it’s not expected. You’re there with the people you are going out with. And if you’re talking to someone there is a reason for it, not like at a party.
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What Matt talks about here is the difference between a scene and the larger milieu, as well as the difference between socialising in a subcultural space and outside of one. At the pub or gig, though there is some socialising between groups, it is also heavily restricted by the rules of the establishment and the social rules of that space. At a gig for example, though random conversations with strangers are allowed, they are not typical. Instead patrons are generally there for the music, and while there may be some socialising, as Matt says, “groups tend to stick to themselves”. There are also cultural restrictions at these events, where, for example, a punk gig will generally contain those who associate with punk and a hip-hop gig those who like hip-hop.

At the party however, there is no distraction from socialising and there is no other reason to be at the party than to socialise. While there may be specific types of music or artistic decorations at these events, these are secondary to the hyper-sociality that is synonymous with a party. In this environment the restrictions on dynamic conversations with strangers, which are in place in other social spaces, are essentially removed or altered so as to allow for gregarious sociality. Furthermore, when one considers the uncomfortable feelings associated with having no one to talk to, or being alone at a party, the enforced nature of this form of sociality is evident. But this is not typical socialising, such as talking to one’s friends, this is socialising with, as Matt calls them, “randoms”.
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The term “randoms” was a local phrase used to describe strangers that were met at gigs and parties. It was used in a relatively neutral fashion, not to signify an inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’ social relation, but more to describe the loose body of individuals encountered at an event, and is used like so:

Steve: What did you do [at the pub]?

John: I was quiet, didn’t chat to randoms or anything … I generally don’t talk to randoms at a pub or club. I prefer parties, but go to pubs as a meeting place.

And:

Cath: The Moon [cafe] is crap, its always the same, there’s never any randoms there. Parties are better cos you never know who you’ll meet.

So ‘random’ is a term that is applied to anyone who is not initially know but who is encountered at an event.

There are two implications that the existence and use of this term alludes to, and the first is that it is relatively normal to talk to strangers. “Randoms” are an expected part of the social landscape and it is considered normal that in some places one will have conversations with them. The second is that it is
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expected that there will be people at events who are unknown, but that over the night they may become associates or friends. The gregarious sociality that this implies is quite important as it shows the openness to new social contacts that these individuals possess, where rather than seeking a repetitious and essentially ‘known’ social environment, they are, especially in the case of the party, actively seeking ‘new’ people. What this term indicates then is that the sociality of the environment is very open to meeting relative strangers, and it is this that is the strength of the party. Through generating a space for open and gregarious socialisation, where there is little in the way of cultural delimiters, such as music or art taste, the party becomes a site that is open to many urban subcultures and one that is conducive to, and occasionally enforces, both interpersonal and inter-group conversation. As such the party can be seen as quite similar to how Bakhtin described the carnival.

In his text on the late medieval/early renaissance author Rabelais, Bakhtin (1984) notes that much of his focus, in terms of the social lives of his characters, was on the carnival. The carnival was essentially a time of celebration involving an entire community and was marked by religious or folk tradition. These feasts typically centred on corporal indulgences, such as alcohol, gluttony and sexual promiscuity, which were taken to such excess as to become grotesque. Though outwardly chaotic, to Bakhtin, the carnival was a time when the rules of the society were altered, or rather reordered, to serve the social function of bringing communities together. At the carnival, rank
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and social hierarchy was either discarded, made redundant or altered so as to dispense with formality and allow all members of the community to actively engage in a common activity.

This is also similar to Victor Turner’s (1969) description of the liminal period; a cultural institution that is between phases of life or at times of social change. In a liminal period the rules of the society are, as per Bakhtin’s carnival, altered to allow for either the changing state of either an individual or society. The examples provided by Turner included that of a West African ceremony involving initiation into manhood. In this ritual all the markers of status and hierarchy were removed from the boys prior to the ceremony, leaving them as equals and ready to take the journey into manhood as a group (Turner 1969: 96) Another example was the right of passage for a king, where prior to his ascension he had to prostrate himself before his subjects, allowing them to insult him if they wished (Turner 1969: 101). Though seemingly quite distinct, the key theme in both of these examples is that they are periods of ‘anti-structure’; the regulations that apply to everyday life are discarded to make way for new anti-rules, and these are essentially the inverse to the regulations that apply to the daily running of the social system. The key reason for the existence of liminal periods is to mark the times of transition, but the effect of changing the social hierarchies is to remove any formality, or social restriction, that would limit inclusion in the ritual. So by removing rank, the constraints that would typically limit the interaction of the
Social structure and the relations of individualised urban community population as a whole are ignored, and this allows for the involvement of the entire community.

The result of both Bakhtin’s carnival and Turner’s liminal period is to create what Turner called “communitas” (1969; 1974: 44) or community removed from location and hierarchy, essentially the ‘spirit’ of community. Communitas stands in opposition to community as a structure and is more expressive of community as it is lived rather than community as it exists in hierarchical or structural form. While the symbols of structural community would be ‘hard’ institutions such as law or social position, the symbols of communitas are ‘the joke’, helping others, or the mundane expressions of communal living. In other words, communitas (disorder and expression) is the corollary of community (structure and order) and neither can exist without the other.

So in any community, according to both Bakhtin and Turner, there is a perpetual need for disorder, and this is essentially what the party is. But it is not complete disorder, it has a very important function, and that is to alter the social codes so as the community can experience “communitas” together. By creating a socio-cultural space where normal restrictions are removed, and thereby generating a mechanism to involve the entire community, or at least large proportions of it, the many social connections that come to make up the
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community are brought together, and the spirit of commonality is invoked. As Bakhtin says:

[c]arnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people. While carnival lasts there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit: it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which we all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all of its participants (1984: 7).

So by being at the carnival, or in the liminal space, one is automatically partaking and submitting to its norms of equality and mass sociality, and it is in this light that we can view the party; as ordered disorder, where all members of community are forced to interact and to experience commonality.

What we have above are three social institutions: the share-house, commercial public space, such as pubs or cafés and the house party. All of them define a set of social practices and all of them contribute to the development of social ties, be
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they strong friendship ties or those that integrate individuals and groups into the greater sociality of the locale. But while they have been presented as effective and powerful examples of institutionalised community space, these are not the typical spaces of community. There has been no mention of church, for example, or a central market place; there is no mention of clubs with formal membership or political organisations. In fact, all of the social institutions that Putnam (2000) used to indicate the demise of American community are essentially non-existent in the lives of these informants. Based on this widely accepted logic, the lack of formal institutions should indicate a lack of community, but as has clearly been shown, there is most definitely a community in operation, just not an archetypal one.

In her study of Danish urban communities, Blokland pointed out that the formal and distinct community components, such as the church, were of lessened significance to community practices. Communities, she said, were making their own socially significant spaces (2003: 112). Similarly, Spencer and Pahl showed that while Putnam’s thesis was in part fair, in that involvement in formal institutions was lessening, people are most definitely not bowling alone. Rather than bowling in formally organised groups, they are instead bowling in informal friendship groups (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 26). And this is why there has been little mention of formal institutions, because they are not significant to these people. What are significant are the informal social institutions that allow for
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individualism and fluidity; institutions that simultaneously allow for autonomy
_and community, and which are flexible, dynamic and fun.

What is being defined then is a community that is not necessarily tightly bound by
rigid and formal institutions, but a weakly linked and inherently more chaotic
community (in that it is generated out of many different subgroups), which allows
for a large degree of independence and individual reflexivity. The institutions that
construct the community generally produce very transient social ties that do not
generate the level of reciprocity that strong and more permanent social ties
produce, but this does not mean there is no reciprocity. The next and final section
will examine the relations that occur in the spaces of community and illustrate
how the superficial communications inherent in these spaces, as well as cycles of
gossip, produce the network ties that link the community members, generate a
very social and individuated form of reciprocity and produce communal moral
codes.

e) Superficiality, gossip and reciprocity: the relations of
individualised community.

In terms of volume, the vast majority of communications that occurred across the
community networks were salutations, gossip and the other seemingly pointless
conversations. Typically these were short lived and were what could be described
as vacuous, of having little depth or content; basically being conversation for
conversations sake. Social commentary on this form of sociality has, from one
camp, been quite negative. As already mentioned, Bauman calls these “cloakroom
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communities” (2000: 199), where individuals dress up and become a community for single events. These events are so filled with spectacle as to not warrant the term community at all and exist to fill the void left behind by the dearth of any genuine community. And many of the aforementioned dystopian theorists see the normalising of this form of communication as a product of overt narcissistic individualism. John, a sample taken from outside of the study group, takes up this position by showing his disgust at the research group’s shallowness.

The stuff they know is highly developed skills in superficial socialising. I don’t think of them in terms of their knowledge about the world, but they have very polished social skills. They can talk to everyone, but if they don’t like talking to people they will get out of there quickly, and they’re comfortable with that. It’s not my scene really and I can’t say I’m fond of them.

From another camp, however, these seemingly irrelevant contacts are crucial to the functioning of urban society.

Superficiality

From both field notes excerpts and comments from informants, the superficiality inherent in the social relations of both the Fremantle and Perth communities is quite evident. As Alan, from Fremantle said “You meet a lot of people, all you want to do is to share a moment with them; you may not be compatible on any other level”. While this may appear callous and deliberately non-committal, the
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strength of this form of relation actually lies in this decision to focus exclusively on the moment. By assuming that the conversation exists simply for conversation’s sake, and that there is no more meaning than whatever is present, the interaction becomes simply a social moment, or a celebration of the social over the personal. Any ‘depth’ that could potentially limit conversation, or any personal history that could distract from the sociality of the event is put aside to generate an instance where interaction is prime. In this way, regardless of the fact that individuals may have nothing in common, they still have the fact that they are in the same space and are involved in a conversation to unite them. So by maintaining social distance, but simultaneously being engaged in a common activity, relatively disparate individuals can interact.

To phrase this more formally, in both *The Metropolis and Mental life* (1973) and *The Philosophy of Money* (1978), Georg Simmel pointed out the necessity of ‘social distance’ in urban environments. By which he meant the ability for individuals to not engage with each other while still being proximate. Money, he said, was one such system; for in the use of money, individuals find commonality through utilising a common medium but are kept distant due to its contractual, as opposed to social, nature (Simmel 1971: 326; Simmel 1978: 256). A similar way of remaining aloof but simultaneously being part of a social system is through the system of fashion. The function of fashion, says Simmel, is primarily to integrate members of society into a common schema while allowing for small individual variation. But it also serves the function of generating class and cultural
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distinction between members of the same society (Simmel 1957). As such it
comes a mechanism for individuals to remain socially distant from others and
instead to rely on the immediate superficial knowledge of their appearance. Thus
allowing for relatively simple categorisation of the metropolitan population and
an efficient method of successfully navigating the urban environment. So in both
money and fashion we see systems that allow us to interact with strangers, but
only because they are systems that negate the need for personal information and
essentially keeps us separate from them.

Elias (1994) also talked of fashion in this regard, but rather than examining how it
functioned in an urban environment he showed how fashion was a device for the
segregation of the elite classes from those below them and also as a mechanism
for distinction within court societies. To a large degree this distinction came about
through the suppression of impulses, the learning of ‘manners’ and the uptake of
explicit cultural codes, all of which signified one’s position with the social
hierarchy. Of particular importance was the control of passions, where rather than
succumbing to violent rages or other ‘vulgar’ expressions of emotion, alternate
cultural mechanisms to achieve these ends were enforced (Mennell 1989: 86).
What was paramount then was the learning of cultural regulations and mastering
the art of what Goffman terms “impression management” (1959: 203). And armed
with this, the individual could adequately express their station and their elevated
position within society without actually having to communicate verbally.
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The various forms of impression management, whether they are fashion, cultural elitism, the suppression of emotion or the perfect enactment of specific roles, all have the commonality that they are focused on the external qualities of the individual. They deliberately mask the private and promote the public, and this is done to allow for the many interactions, and the multiple associations that arise in large social systems, to take place smoothly and efficiently. This is what Simmel referred to as “The Superficial Character of Sociability” (1950a: 48) and “The Artificial World of Sociability” (1950a: 55), where, during socialising, a public persona is adopted and deliberately ‘light’ conversation is upheld. This is done so as to keep conversation ‘open’ amongst many diverse individuals at large social events. Deep conversations are not entered into as this would not be generalised enough to accommodate the range of people in public and would negatively affect the sociability of the event (1950a: 44). The example that Simmel provides is the party:

A gathering of only a few persons permits considerable mutual adaptation … But the more persons come together, the less it is probable that they converge in the more valuable and intimate side of their natures (1950a: 112).

To accommodate this divergence of perspectives, a superficial and deliberately artificial, or public, air is maintained. By generalising representation and conversation, this public performance is designed to make socialising easier and
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to allow for greater interaction between the partygoers. As such, superficiality is a
highly effective mechanism for public interaction.

This is essentially Richard Sennett’s position on public life, where to go “out in
public” meant that individuals had to hide personal details and actively construct a
persona that reflected who they were. As such, Sennett proposed that the very
nature of public life made it contrived. Individuals, says Sennett, are not
spontaneous; they act in completely pre-meditated ways. They are not concerned
with the deeply personal aspects of others’ characters, they are focused on that
which is visible and on the surface (1974: 87). They are then, primarily concerned
with the superficial aspects of others. But superficiality here does not equate to an
inherently negative, or lacking, social experience. In this case, what superficial
interaction does is to generate a field where the personal is disregarded to allow
for greater freedom in communication. Sennett illustrates this by providing the
example of the type of sociality that occurred in Eighteenth Century coffee
houses.

[i]n order for information to be as full as possible, distinctions of
rank were temporally suspended … it was bad form to even touch
on the social origins of other persons when talking to them in the
coffee house, because the free flow of talk might be impeded
(Sennett 1974: 81).
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So in order to maintain a social environment where ideas and conversation flowed freely, the formal, or overtly personal, details were excluded from conversation. However, since the eighteenth century, society in general has, according to Sennett, become more concerned with the feelings and emotions of the individual. Due to this there has been a shift in public life, and instead of “out in public” being separate from one’s private world, and therefore based on a distinct set of social practices, it has become embedded with the same rationale as one’s private world; that is, it has come to be associated with the same feelings one would expect in one’s home.

Rather than being ‘out in public’ and it being expected that individuals will act out a, not fake, but distinctly separate, public persona, it is now the norm to expect individuals to be their ‘true’ or authentic selves. A process that Sennett argues has destroyed public life. So by focusing on individual authenticity, as well as bringing personal details into public life, the acting out of one’s public persona has been set aside and labelled as ‘insincere’.

But as it was this ‘insincerity’, or superficiality, that allowed for the avoidance of issues that would make mass sociality ‘difficult’, its demise has led to a reduction in the use of public space and mass socialising by urban populations (Sennett 1974: 11, 15, 37).

While Sennett’s position is quite overarching and, to a degree, overstated, the key point, that informality and superficiality breeds sociability, is clearly made. For
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public space to be used effectively and for individuals to effectively interact, a communication system that is not driven by authenticity and personal information must be utilised. Barry Wellman makes a similar point regarding social networks, stating that the effectiveness of the Internet, in that it has reached so many diverse populations, is based on its lack of social richness (2001: 12). And Grewal argues that the success of globalisation is due, at least partly, to the accessibility of its key institutions and the sociality that is achieved though the use of these institutions (2008). What is significant for high levels of sociality then is not so much the strong or deep emotional connections associated with personal life, but the weak and transient connections associated with gregarious sociality and being ‘out in public’.

As mentioned above, in his paper on job hunting, Granovetter (1973) showed the inherent weakness of strong ties, in that, while they may help individuals to get jobs, generally through kin type relations, they limit the field of inquiry to small, densely knit groups. Weak ties, on the other hand, open up this field to many more possible sources of information. “The strength of weak ties” lies in the range, or the social distance, that information can travel, and if an individual has more weak ties, they are in a position to hear from more sources, putting them at an advantage in terms of job seeking. Taking this theory further, Granovetter goes on to suggest that, as weak links generally tie divergent groups together, they are, in the way that they ‘bridge’ the gaps between groups, actually the mechanism whereby social integration occurs. This takes place through the cultural diffusion
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that happens when many groups are interrelated and when information can flow between them, and this only occurs in environments with multiple weak links. Youth networks, for example, are informal, accessible and generally based on weak links, and as such, transfer information extremely quickly and efficiently (Granovetter 1983: 214). Similarly, information diffusion in communities, and integration into the community schema, occurs much more quickly and effectively where there are numerous weak links to tie the many smaller groups together (Granovetter 1983: 219).

So by having social systems that are deliberately ‘light’ in terms of emotional content, and ‘weak’ in terms of the strength of the connections, what is created is a communication system that is accessible to many different types of people and which, due to being based on generalised, superficial contact, is also capable of bridging the gaps between many groups. And given that this is the primary type of conversation occurring at parties, then it is this that is allowing information to disperse throughout the community and allowing the many groups in the community to unite.

At the parties, exhibitions and gigs, it was the (outwardly meaningless but internally functional) superficial conversations that allowed the individual groups in the area to mix and become integrated in the wider locale. As such this form of social relation is essential to the development of this type of community as they
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allow individuals to be simultaneously aloof, part of the community and are
generalised enough to accommodate many.

**Gossip**

However, to say that superficial relations are the only types of relation that occur
would be false, and to say that, due to the informality and freedom of sociality
that there were no rules, would also be completely incorrect. While most of the
observed activity was of this form, there was also another social convention that
was used to great effect. This was gossip.

Etzioni has been quoted as saying “A viable community is not an inclusive one
which values diversity, but one where people actively gossip about each other”
(Crane and Dee 2001). To a large degree this was found to be the case. The
researched communities were not overly concerned with inclusivity, though their
social operations produced that effect, but what they were very good at, and spent
large amounts of time doing was gossiping.

The productive power of this form of communication can be viewed in a number
of ways. In terms of information transfer, gossip has been shown to be a hugely
effective method of transferring data throughout cultural groups. If the links
within the community are primarily ‘strong ties’, then information will remain
within a single group, but if the links in the community are weak, as in the ‘weak
ties’ mentioned above, then gossip information will spread to the entire
community (Weimann in Cotteral 2007: 35). Another way to view gossip is as the
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maintenance of a moral order, where the cultural order is monitored and policed through the gossip system of a local. In this way individuals who break the cultural codes of an area are admonished and essentially punished by the social system surrounding them (Herskovits in Gluckman 1963: 307). So generally gossip can be thought of as a way to develop a homology (Willis 1978) within a group. Where, through gossip, a common culture is communicated through a population and the social structures and sanctions of the locale are enacted and maintained (Gluckman 1963).

But aside from the structural maintenance of order, the act of gossip can also be seen to comprise a large volume of community interaction, and as such to be a large part of what community actually is. In Gluckman’s case, he illustrates how he was excluded from community life, simply because he could not gossip about others. When he tried to talk about others in the clan he was told that gossip about certain people was reserved for those who knew them or were related to them. The fact that he was not close enough, or involved enough in community life, prohibited him from commenting, which then excluded him from interacting on any real depth with the rest of the community. So, for Gluckman, to be left out of gossip circles was tantamount to being left out of the community, or as he put it, “gossip does not have isolated roles in community life, but is part of the very blood and tissue of that life” (1963: 308). Gossip then is not simply transfer of data or the maintenance of moral order, but is also a large part of the activity that actually defines community. And in this way we can start to see gossip as, not
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necessarily the sum total of what community is, but a large part of what makes it a community. This was also evident in Elias’ study of established and outsider relations. In this social relation, the vast amount of information transferred amongst community members was gossip, and through the very act of talking about the community, the community networks were formed (Elias and Scotson 1994).

Through the very act of talking to each other about issues that are considered to concern the community, the community is invoked. The establishing of what warrants community concern, discussing who is inside and outside of the community, deciding who has done the right or wrong thing and who is worthy of sanctions or further gossip, all go to both maintain the social links that are the essence of the community and to maintain a common moral order that marks the cultural limits of the community.

By way of illustrating the effectiveness of gossip, to act as both a focus for social activity and as a way of establishing common mores, the following extract from a focus group in Fremantle is presented. In this extract the use of gossip as a common topic for conversation can be observed, but equally as important is the way that the group establishes a common code of morality. This is significant in two ways. Firstly it shows the way in which moral codes can be maintained in an overtly individuated community. And secondly, it shows how common culture and common perspectives of the locale are negotiated.
Lee: There are no real set rules in Freo; you do what you want.
Phil: I don’t know. Everyone got pretty upset when Simon came out with
that tart [other woman] last night.
Lee: Only because we know the wife. She was at home with two kids!
Alan: I’ve been in that situation before where if you didn’t know the
person at home you wouldn’t have cared.
Gary: Do you know that she didn’t know?
Phil: She’d know about it.
Lee: If she knew that’s what the relationship was like it would be ok, but
she doesn’t.
Mike: Then the question is, was he accepted in the situation?
Lee: Well he knew we weren’t going to dob [tell on him].
Phil: He wanted to join us but left ‘cos everyone was so disapproving.
Gary: Why aren’t you going to dob? What is it about the value systems
that makes you not tell?
Lee: It’s between him and his wife, it’s personal as well.
Gary: Maybe it’s cos he knew you weren’t going to dob?
Lee: He knew we weren’t going to tell. It’s not that it’s wrong, it’s just
that I feel for her. I know her and I know she’d be upset. Know
what I mean?
Gary: But we don’t know what’s really going on, you have to ask him?
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Alan: But Lee said they wouldn’t judge him and that’s important. That’s liberating. Fremantle is liberating because you will not be judged. And besides, what you don’t know won’t hurt you.

Lee: I don’t want to see her get hurt. I want him to grow up and talk to her. I wish he’d keep it away from everybody else.

Alan: I had an issue when a guy who was sleeping with a friend who was sleeping with someone else too and no one told her. We had a debate about it and half said we should interfere and the other half said no. When the girl found out, she understood that we didn’t tell her. If that happens to me, I don’t want to know.

Phil: I was part of that. I tried to console her, but she didn’t care. No relationship goes on forever.

Rhianna: Maybe she just didn’t want to be as open in general conversation?

Alan: Some people are forced to accept it because they’re afraid they’ll lose their friends if they get too shitty that the guy she was with last night is now with someone else. Or the guy she just broke up with is with someone else. Other people I’ve known that are like that are completely out of touch, are lost, have completely split the scene, ‘cos they couldn’t deal with it.

Rhianna: It’s pretty close and tight knit and your always going to bump into people that you don’t really want to

Alan: It’s a small town.
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Lee: What annoys me is that he sought us out and made us part of it, and I don’t want to be part of it
Phil: Yeah!
Alan: I Don’t want to endorse it.
Lee: He could have gone and done it in private.
Phil: You should have told him off.
Mike: You’re putting the community at risk by stuff like that.
Rhianna: Does it really? I don’t think it would. People would interact regardless, they might not be happy about it and they probably wouldn’t say anything but …
Mike: Its one of those things that isn’t talked about.
Rhianna: You just ignore it.
Phil: She’s happy now though, and she wouldn’t be otherwise. I’m not saying one way or the other. I don’t know whether it’s right or not.

There are a number of interesting observations about the above exchange. The first is the length of time that this was talked about. This single event, and the discussion surrounding it, managed to keep this crowd entertained for roughly ten minutes. It essentially performed the function of generating a common topic by getting the whole group involved and allowing everyone an opinion. So it, first and foremost, enabled communication and maintained discussion, which, as Gluckman says, is the essence of any community.
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The second point is how these individuals came together to negotiate both a common moral code and a common perspective of the locale. Each individual came to the focus group with his or her own standpoint. However, once they began to engage with others, or entered into triadic/social space (Simmel 1950b), then they were in a position of negotiation with others, essentially adapting their position to allow for consensus to be reached and conversations to flow. With consensus came an implicit agreement with the propositions of others, so when individuals said “There are no real set rules in Freo” and “Fremantle is liberating because you will not be judged” there was an implied acceptance of these statements as facts. Similarly, in the discussion of the immoral nature of the man’s transgressions, it is only towards the end of the conversation, when consensus is reached, that the issue is resolved. It is only when the group, as a whole, has made an agreement on the nature of the transgression that conversation is allowed to move on. As such, gossip is the space where the individual actually becomes part of the community. It is when they give up part of their individual perspective to aid in the voicing of the community sentiment on matters. And it is where they partake in the decision making of the community by joining the many voices that actively negotiate and construct its norms and morals.

The final point is the tension between involvement and disengagement. From the above it is evident that the group does not approve of the man’s behaviour, but at the same time they are torn in regard to what to do about it. It soon becomes clear however, that it is not necessarily the infidelity that is an issue, but that he has
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placed the onus upon those who saw him to act. It seems then, that cheating on one’s partner is only part of the issue. What is also significant is that he did not do it in private, potentially creating problems for the rest of the community. So what the group is really discussing then is not just the morality of the man, or his actions, but his disregard for the conventions typically associated with this behaviour. This once again shows the overt individualism within the community, where it is more important that individuals do not lumber the community with their personal issues than they behave ‘correctly’.

So from just this one piece of gossip, a number of points have been made. Firstly, in its own right, the discussion captivated the group and provided them with a focal point around which to communicate. Secondly it provided the space to negotiate a common moral perspective and a common local response to a community issue. As such it showed the social space where the community is invoked and also where the individual becomes an active part of that community. And thirdly it showed the tension between individualism and solidarity that is ever present within community. Gossip then is quite significant in terms of group development and, given that this was just one of many instances where this type of conversation took place, its position as a contributor to the functioning of community should be evident. However, while its centrality as a community development device is worthy of further discussion, it is the final point from above, or the tension between the individual and the community, which will be elaborated on below.
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**Reciprocity**

If, as Putnam says, “social capital refers to the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of trust and reciprocity that arise from them” (2000: 19), and if social capital is modelled on the forms of sociality that constitute community (as Putnam is continually draws our attention to), then somewhere in these communities there must be some form of reciprocal relationship. Throughout the thesis, however, there has been little in the way to support this. Sean, for example, in the Fremantle chapter, was essentially destitute and friendless, even though he was very well connected. Similarly, Rhianna showed how, though she had many friends, she was essentially alone, but she also suggested that she could utilise these friendships for a variety of different scenarios. Consider the quote below:

> Some friends shit me to tears. Its bizarre in Freo, there’s people in my immediate social environment that I hang out with but don’t trust. Natalie is very self-centred, she says she’s into [likes] others but isn’t. Emma I don’t really trust, she’s more in the party friend category, but we still have one-on-ones [personal emotional conversations]. Actually both of those have ‘burnt’ me [treated badly/skorned] in the past. So why do I hang out with them if I don’t like them? I guess its cos they’re part of the community I live in. I don’t have to speak to them but they’re friends of friends. It’s kind of smoothing the circle and you’re never going to get along
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with everyone all the time. And everyone meets different needs, so
if I want to go to a gig or something. They serve different needs.
They’re fun to go and play with, but wouldn’t cry on their
shoulder.

What exists then is a dense community of social networks, where individuals will,
due to knowing certain people, have to associate with people they do not
necessarily like. At the same time, gossip circulates within these networks,
sometimes praising and sometimes shaming individuals, resulting in friends and
associates changing alliances and occasionally acting against each other. The
result of this is a system where social ties may not be very strong or long lasting,
and where the reciprocal social contracts of long-term friendships do not get a
chance to grow. However, the reciprocal arrangements that do exist are also
evident in the above.

In his personal communities argument (1988), Barry Wellman showed that many
of the relationships individuals have do not necessarily contain any aspects of
mutual reciprocity. In fact he showed that in many cases the opposite was actually
the case, with individuals having many relationships that were based on very
simple patterns of interaction (Wellman and Wortley 1990: 559). He also said that
highly reciprocal relationships can actually be quite stifling and that individuals
prefer not to have many of these in their life. By way of example he says that few
people choose to live next to their mothers (Wellman and Wortley 1990: 583),
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arguably the most supportive relationship one will ever have. So instead of deeply
caring and highly reciprocal relationships being the mainstay of an individual’s
set of friends, what is more significant to developing friendship is actually a dense
volume of reasonably casual network links.

Informality and superficiality are, according to Bellotti, the key aspects of
friendship. She argues that friendship needs to be informal to work and that if it
were a ‘high needs’ relationship then the responsibilities would outweigh the
benefit of friendship; which is essentially for social interaction and non-committal
fun. Friendship does not require trust or deep reciprocity, and even in situations
where individuals have been betrayed, they still stay friends with people due to
the social pressures to do so by others (Bellotti 2008: 325). What is most
important is the fact that they socialise and do so in an informal and ‘light’
fashion (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 198). This seems to be the opposite of a caring
relationship, but it is this lightness and informality that actually is the reciprocal
arrangement and the real strength of these relationships. It is a reciprocity based
on sociality, freedom and acceptance, over that of deep emotional support, and in
the context of the high levels of individuality within the group, is the most
functional form of social contact, in that it allows for independence and
commitment simultaneously.

The strength, or rather the attractiveness, of both locales (in terms of friendship
and commitment) was that they were simultaneously individuated and communal.
Individuals, such as Alan, below, continually commented on the way in which they could do as they please but still be part of a very active community.

I wouldn’t encroach on other’s space, as I wouldn’t want this to happen to me. They might spend less time with you, but that’s all. People are attracted to this. It brings them to Freo.

So in maintaining a light, superficial, non-committal and ‘fun’ social environment, these people are taking part in a social contract whereby they limit the type of reciprocity to that of the purely social. They deliberately do not get involved with personal issues and do not talk in depth, as this would potentially lead to people intruding on their’s and another’s freedom. And in the preserving of social distance what is occurring is that these individuals are managing a social system whereby they can essentially do what they want while being part of a larger social group: a fact summed up best by Phil.

Phil: People without family or a group of friends to support them would be at a shocking risk of killing themselves, cos there’s no-one to interfere in their thought processes.

Lee: That’s where community is important. When people hit rock bottom, they need people to help out, someone to give a shit. It’s your friends and the people around you that help.
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Alan: And the worth of the community is how people are looked after. I mean there are times when I’ve needed to go out and be around a large group of people cos there’s something I’ve got going on in my life, but I wont necessarily talk about it. It’s that subtle supporting network of being out in public.

Phil: It makes you feel not so isolated, even if you are really. When you see the same people for 15 years, never been to his house or had dinner, but I’ve had a chat to him when I’m low, or at parties and it made me feel good, cos he’s a familiar part of my life. Me and Andy have known each other for years and pointed at the same people and laughed, so you feel like you know them. You don’t often do it, but every once in a blue moon, maybe even once in a decade, you talk to somebody about something intense. Just having those people around and they won’t judge you cos they already know you are at your worst and drunk. That is support.

So to be “at your worst and drunk” and still be accepted is, according to Phil, real support. To just be in the presence of others, regardless of how much he knows them, is enough to make Alan feel as though he has support, and to have friends to go out and have fun with is enough to make Rhianna ignore the bad times she
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has shared with these friends. So what the reciprocal arrangement between these individuals equates to is one where they will continue to be ‘light’ and to continue socialising with each other. As such, it is essentially a sociable reciprocity rather than a personal one.

While the ‘deep’ reciprocal relations of traditional community may not be evident, it is clear that the environment is filled with large amounts of ‘light’ reciprocity. And rather than the social contract involving emotional or financial support, it takes the form of maintaining deliberately shallow and non-committal relations, which serve the dual purpose of relieving individuals of responsibility for others and also preserving the social nature of their relationships. It could be argued then that favouring this form of community support is actually one of the key mechanisms that allows for the continued existence of this highly individualised but also strongly networked community.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to explore the structure and some of the social mechanisms of the two communities. It was to illustrate how, though they do not outwardly map on to conceptions of traditional communities, as they are highly individualised, loosely connected and superficial, they are still valid and highly successful examples of communal behaviour.

The first point of the chapter was to show how urban community, in general, is partial, fractured and fluid. This was founded on the social organisation of the city, which was shown to contain numerous subcultures, all of which operated
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simultaneously, and which overlayed and interacted with each other. As a result of this there could be no singular urban community and little in the way of community boundaries, as all merged together to form the sociality of the city. The aim here was to show how, though at times the research communities often appear vague and ephemeral, that this is typical of urban communities. Urban communities are, by the fact that they exist in a dense social environment, fractured and incomplete, as they are combinations and permutations of the many other groups around them.

The second point, which was related to the first, was that rather than urban communities being conceived of as homogenous groups, they are better considered as comprised of discrete individuals, who all have their own personal networks. Once again, this broadened the idea of community from being singular and overarching to being an inherently organic object that is a product of the interconnections between the multiple personal networks. The use of personal networks worked in two ways. Firstly, by showing how community can be different for each individual. And secondly it starts to speak against the argument proposed by many social theorists, that individualisation is killing community. With the personalised network typology of community we can see how both individualisation and community can exist simultaneously, with the individual having their own network, and the sum of the interstices of their relations becoming the community. As such it showed how the individualisation process works within a community framework.
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Starting with the individual and working out to the community, the next section showed how these theories could be applied. Here the individual and their personal network were defined as the centre, or the starting point, of the community. And as their relationships started to intertwine with those around them, so local scenes and communities grew.

The fourth section examined the spaces where the intertwining of networks occurred, such as pubs, clubs and parties. Aside from elaborating on the significance of social space to these groups, this was also to show the ways in which individuals mixed and the importance that this has on developing feelings of community, or “communitas”. The shared houses, gigs and parties are the spaces where these individuals came to know the community through mixing with others. As such they provided an integration function into the greater sociality of the locale. The house party was particularly significant in this regard as it showed the highest levels of open sociality and brought more diverse individuals together than any other communal space, allowing them to share the experience of a common event. It was also the space where social rules were altered to make socialising obligatory, effectively forcing individuals to communicate with other members of the community.

The final section examined some of the communication techniques that occurred across the communities, and in particular the significance of superficial
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conversation and gossip as community building devices. The aim here was to
show that rather than these forms of communication being inherently negative or
unhealthy, that they were quite productive, in terms of aiding in community
formation.

Superficiality was shown to be a key element in the maintaining of social
distance, which performed a number of functions. The first was to generate a
generalised conversation, which had the effect of keeping conversations relatively
‘open’, thus allowing more individuals to join in. This had a flow on effect of
keeping the sociality of events such as parties open to many types of people, thus
making them accepting of the many diverse groups in the community, effectively
allowing the entire community to come together in the one space. The second
function was the way in which superficiality allowed for the performance of a
public persona, thus allowing individuals to communicate far more effectively
than if personal details were included. The third function was, through keeping
social distance, it allowed individuals to maintain some autonomy from the
community whilst still being a part of a community event, thus satisfying the
desires for individuality with those of community simultaneously.

Gossip was also shown to be a key resource in community construction as it both
allowed for the transfer of local cultural information and maintained a common
morality through using praise and shaming gossip to enforce its dominance. When
combined, these communication mechanisms created a system that allowing for
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the fast transfer of local cultural data across the entire community, thus allow the members of the communities to have coherence whilst being part of many separate groups. As such they maintained the social networks and allowed the many local groups to operate as a coherent community, but also as a fractured set of diverse urban subcultures, and an even more fractured set of individual networks.

The last issue to be addressed was that of reciprocity. This briefly explored the types of social contracts that occurred within the communities and attempted to address the issue of community as necessitating, or being synonymous with, a deeply caring environment. While this section drew attention to the fact that strong reciprocal arrangements were not commonplace, it also showed the significance of weak, or ‘fun’, reciprocal arrangements. These relationships assisted in maintaining a ‘light’ and sociable public space, where commitment was largely avoided, enabling a highly individualised community. It also showed that the reciprocal arrangements necessary for community to form do not have to be deeply emotional or intensely personal, instead they can be an agreement regarding autonomy and sociability.

In sum, the aim of this chapter was to show how community can be both coherent and fractured, as well as both individuated and communal. It was to show the significance of subaltern, hedonistic environments or those which are disregarded by traditional perspectives of community. The chapter valorised the pub, party,
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the shared house and the other social institutions that are so often overlooked, to
show the effectiveness and productive nature of seemingly pointless conversation.
Overall it was to show how social phenomena that are typically considered in a
negative fashion, namely gossip, superficiality, hedonism, gregarious socialising,
social fracturing and individualism, are not as pointless or as dire as some may
think. These quite normal and frequent occurrences are very effective in
generating productive contact between individuals.
Chapter 8: Art as Common Culture and context for socialisation

Introduction

“As a social organisation of meaning, culture can be seen as made up of an extremely complex interlinkage of formulae; a network of perspectives, with a continuous production of cultural forms between them. In this manner, the perspectivation of meaning is a powerful engine in creating a diversity of culture within the complex society. Call the network a polyphony, if the perspectives are at the same time voices; term it a conversation if it appears fairly low-key and consensual; refer to it as a debate, if you wish to emphasise contestation; or describe it as a cacophony, if you find mostly disorder” (Hannerz 1992: 68)

The above quote shows the complexity of culture, but in addition shows that, in any one time or place, multiple cultures exist and interact; sometimes harmoniously to generate common perspectives and sometimes not, creating the appearance of chaos. However, regardless of the form of interaction, the situation where there are ranges of cultural voices operating simultaneously has become a relatively normal aspect of contemporary life, particularly in cities. Jonathon Raban’s contribution to the observation of this ‘polyphony’, has been to point out the inherently complex variety of cultural icons available to us. One of his
examples takes the reader through the advertisements inside a London tube station, which show a diverse range of individuals (big, small, white, black, sporty, intelligent, male, female) selling products; all of which promise a better life and all of which are contradictory. His question to the reader is, which one is the individual to believe? This “emporium of style” generates the need for something solid, for trends and objects to identify with, that make a running shoe or something as utterly useless as a “Moroccan birdcage” into a cultural anchor (Raban 1974: 98). To Raban these objects provide the individual with cultural and individual identity as well as the symbols around which to start building a personal community. And it is these ‘anchors’ that provide the focus for this chapter; the objects, cultures, norms and trends that culturally unite individuals across the urban landscape.

The previous chapter examined the superficial relations exhibited by members of the two study groups, the apparent social fracturing within the urban environment and the necessity of light interaction and weak social links in the development of urban communities. It showed how superficial communications were essential in order to bind the multitude of individuals, groups and scenes together into a form of sociality that was fluid enough to accommodate many diverse positions. This chapter deals with a similar phenomenon, but instead of examining the fractured social environment, it looks at the outwardly fractured cultural environment, and how one aspect of the common culture, namely art and creativity, creates unity in this system of individuated and temporary associations.
The aim of this chapter is to explore the outwardly fractured nature of contemporary urban culture and to illustrate how art and creativity are utilised to generate both the common culture and the common spaces necessary to develop group cohesion. Essentially art will be shown to be a common theme amongst the many groups operating in the urban centres, as well as a common factor that allows them to form the larger community. Here art serves the function of providing the homology between individuals, similar to the role placed by subcultural argot and ritual (Cohen 1980: 66). However, rather than it providing a definitive style, as subcultures have been otherwise described (Spradley 1970; Willis 1978; Hebdige 1979; Mitchell 2003; Kilpatrick 2005), it establishes itself as a meta-theme, or a framework, that joins the many divergent groups and individuals across the city. This framework is ‘loose’ enough so as to be inclusive of many types of people, thus allowing for heightened individualism, but also cohesive enough so as to maintain a cultural community boundary. What emerges from this chapter is a norm of cultural production, or at least the representation of it. This norm generates both the cultural and the social space that incorporates wider elements of the locale, to form the social networks and commonalities that are synonymous with community relations.

The structure of the chapter is like so. First, theoretical positions on the fractured nature of contemporary culture are examined, and, by way of providing a working example of this fracturing, theories relating to subculture are utilised. The aim
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here is to illustrate, in a similar fashion to the previous chapter, the fluid and poly-themic state of urban culture, but also to show the disjointed nature of this, where the subcultures that previously provided the cultural basis for group cohesion have become so fractured and numerous as to have little effect. Similarly, urban culture in general is represented as highly individualised and informed as much by individual distinction as group cohesion, the result of which is a situation where (theoretically) no common culture can exist. However, art, and in particular contemporary counter-culture art typified by magazines such as *Juxtapoz*, is shown to provide the cross cultural framework necessary for the simultaneous de-structuring of (sub)cultural codes and the consolidation of the resultant fractured groups into a common culture.

Following this are four sections that examine how this is achieved. The first of these looks at how art and creativity, or enacting the creative individual, generates a common identity that transcends (sub)cultural boundaries. The argument presented here illustrates how art has come to incorporate subcultural activity, such as tattoos and graffiti. The effect of this has been to generate a pan-subculturalism, where art essentially becomes the unifying theme across the many types and variations of cultural collective operating across the city. As such it provides a common identity and set of cultural institutions, regardless of (sub)cultural affiliation, to become one of the driving forces behind the development of the community.
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The next section examines how art, and the system of exhibitions and performances provide the space where these individuals can come together and begin the process of developing the social networks indicative of community. Here the art (inclusive of music and other performance) is shown to be secondary to the socialising that occurs in these spaces, as such it provides a very social analysis of art-space, one that essentially removes itself from aesthetics to focus on the interaction occurring at these events.

Following this is a section that shows the artful way in which individuals actively construct their identities out of the objects around them. In this section the individual, or rather the public image of the individual, becomes a work of art that is heavily tied to notions of authenticity and exclusiveness. The final section examines how common culture, in the form of cultural critique and common discourse, becomes a communication protocol amongst community members. In this section the outwardly pointless discussion of contemporary cultural icons, as well as the conversations regarding the exhibitions and gigs mentioned in earlier sections, become cultural markers of community, as well as devices for communication across distinct groups.

In sum, the chapter illustrates the ways in which the individualised nature of contemporary culture is overcome to generate a common theme of creativity amongst community members. It shows how art, as well as the social practices
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surrounding it, overcome (sub)cultural differences, and allow for the interconnections that breed communities to form.

Fractured (sub) culture

The significance of common culture lies in the fact that territory, while important, does not wholly subsume all its inhabitants into a singular community. As Margaret Stacy says: “In localities where there is a local social system there will also be elements of other social systems present in the locality, i.e. the local social system will not totally encompass all institutions and relationships present” (1969: 143-144). Bell and Newby support this by showing how community is a ‘multiplex’ or multi-stranded relationship involving many social institutions, resulting in any ‘community’ only partly defining the entire social operations of an area (1971: 18-19). This concurs with the points raised about the plural nature of community from the previous chapters. When these points are these taken with more contemporary theories on community (Wellman 1988), the idea of a singular community covering an entire area gives way to a position where there are many communities occurring simultaneously in the same space. And with this conception comes the need for many cultures around which these communities can construct themselves.

The relevance of common culture is particularly evident in the urban community studies based on subcultures, where the focus is generally not on territory but on the common worldview that joins the individuals together. In the vast majority of studies of subculture, it is the common culture, in the form of music, the style of
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clothing or belief system that generates group cohesion. In essence, the idealised construct of a style based on musical form manufactures initial group cohesion, which in turn leads to the construction of symbolically significant space, such as clubs and the like, leading to the formation of distinct social groupings based on subcultural affinity. Becker shows this to be the case with jazz in the 1950’s, when, as clubs began to get popular, and individuals started to frequent them more, so a symbolic economy grew and the rules of a separate subculture became established (Becker 2004). But these subcultures do not absolutely define a locale, as Fisher suggested, they make up part of the environment (1975), leaving other parts for other subcultures. This can lead to the illusion of an outwardly fractured society, but, as was covered in the previous chapter, this is actually the ‘normal’ functioning of the urban milieu.

When writing on the diversity of the urban environment, Raban talks about London and how the cultures within it are so many and so varied as to have no apparent cohesion.

London now is not so much an encyclopaedia, but a maniac’s scrapbook, filled with colourful entries that have no relation to each other, no determining rational or economic scheme (1974: 123).
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But when faced with the prospect of infinite choice and the hyperindividuality that cities allude to, he shows how individuals find each other in specific social spaces, at particular times and in particular cultural settings.

I sometimes go to a pub in Soho with a corner full of book reviewers, and one catches the same note there: the same pitch of voice, the same technical talk, the progressive hunch over the table of people making a close, improvised, temporary community in the middle of a city of strangers. Communities like this, which come to life around an idea, are constantly dissolving; they are not fixed in place or time, although membership of them is a permanently defining feature of one’s identity (1974: 113)

The image this is creating is one where the incoherent social and cultural milieu that essentially defines the city still manages to generate cohesion, though it is often fleeting and based on imagined commonality. However, it still shows the necessity for multiple cultural ideals to accommodate the infinite variety of individuals within the city. So by having different cultures around which to gather, the different communities inherent in the urban environment can categorise themselves and place themselves within the local system of cultural logic.
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One effect of this is to maintain the heterogenous state of cities, but the second is to provide the diversity that is the precursor for the openness and plurality of cultures, which generally only the city allows. In this way the fragmented nature of subcultural affiliation is ultimately beneficial as it maintains the ‘open’ sociality and prevents a definitive or absolute culture from taking over the urban space.

Ulf Hannerz similarly showed the beneficial nature of subcultures. In one example, he described how jazz became central to the beat poets and how this subculture inscribed a new cultural symbolism throughout San Francisco (1992: 210) Similarly, the art culture in Paris (Richardson 1969) and New York (Zukin 1995; Currid 2007) have all come from the diversity inherent in the urban environment and the subculture that united around key cultural hot-spots and aided in the construction of the ‘symbolic economies’ of those cities. So subcultures have considerable effect; they allow for many cultures to operate simultaneously in the same place and also provide the multiple cultural norms around which these communities can gather. But, they are based on, and defined by, a common culture, and in contemporary urban environment this is increasingly difficult to find.

In his book on subcultures, David Muggleton (2000) examined the effect the post-structural turn has had on individuals involved with subcultures. In it he surmised that, similar to Baudrillard’s perspective (Ritzer 1997: 95), neo-subculturalists
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have become “sartorial bricoleurs” (Muggleton 2000: 41): essentially taking and reworking the cultural symbols surrounding them to create their own personal expression of subcultural style. Likewise he showed how the bonds of group affiliation have weakened so as to produce a breakdown in the collective identity typically associated with subcultural belonging (Muggleton 2000: 62). What Muggleton’s book is showing then is the affect de-traditionalisation and individualisation are having on those who are directly involved with the consumption and construction of the city’s symbolic capital. The common symbols individuals derive meaning from have become hollow, producing a lack of unity amongst the youth population, forcing them to put meaning into objects and essentially create their own culture.

From fieldwork, this heightened individualism was observed in a number of forms, the first being the dress styles at the various events around Perth. At all of these events there was little in the way of a common ‘look’. Instead there was an overriding theme of difference, as each person attempted to look distinct from both contemporary ‘mainstream’ fashion as well as from each other. Generally this was done through wearing clothes from second-hand shops as well as wearing items that were, practically, unique. The small boutiques covered in the Perth section showed where these items came from and, in their focus on exclusivity and individual distinction over common consumption, further highlighted the individualised nature of contemporary urbanism. In addition to this, the mingling of divergent styles and the fluidity between the various subcultures was very
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evident, a point covered in the last chapter and which reinforces Muggleton’s point regarding the breakdown of collective identity. All of these observations were also noted in Fremantle, where there was little in the way of singular subcultural identity, resulting in what could only be described as a ‘fractured’ cultural landscape. This concurs with contemporary perceptions of common identity and group affiliation where traditional identities and group formations are suffering a fragmentation of collective culture (Lash and Urry 1987: 265). On the basis of this, if one of the markers of community is a shared set of cultural norms, and these cultural norms are deficient, then individualised culture has truly killed community. And if the stylistic similarities that maintain subcultures, which are arguably the generators of the culture of the city, are defunct, then what of the culture that reinvigorates the city?

While post-modernity implies a decline of social structure, it is wrong to think that this equates with anti-structure (Lash and Urry 1994: 132). Rather it is a differing structure, one where the symbols that maintain the cultural order have shifted. They are still there, and still maintain a cultural logic, but have changed from what we have been used to. So on one hand it could be argued that common culture, especially subculture, has disintegrated, on the other, it could be argued that there are still common ties between people, its just that the signifiers of these commonalities have shifted. This has left urban communities in a precarious position, as from one perspective there appears to be no cultural similarity uniting these people, due to their all striving for independence, but from another
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perspective it could be argued that this independence, or apparent hyper-individuality, is the commonality between them.

The American popular culture magazine *Juxtapoz* provides not only a good example of the eclecticism inherent in contemporary urban culture, but also a hint towards some of the unifying themes running through inner-city communities. Nestled amidst the ever-growing number of magazines devoted to art and culture, this publication spawns, according to its founder, Robert Williams:

[from story illustrations. Comic book art, science fiction, movie poster art, motion picture production and effects, music art and posters, psychedelic and punk rock art, hot rod and biker art, surfer, beach bum and skater graphics, graffiti art, tattoo art, pin-up art, pornography and myriad other common places and egalitarian art forms. And all are simply dismissed and treated with condescension by the formal art authorities (Anderson 2004: 13).]
Figure 19: Juxtapoz art and culture magazine, hip-hop, ink, sculpture and toys.

Figure 20: Plastic dolls, painted sneakers, wall hangings, graffiti and subcultures.
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Starting with the aim of providing a showcase for those artists considered ‘beneath’ traditional art, this magazine has come to be one of the bastions of contemporary culture and has largely been responsible for the tremendous growth of ‘lowbrow’ art or pop-surrealism. Essentially this art form includes all the genres mentioned above and more. It is a collection that includes any form of creativity, from crocheting through to sculpture, any medium from pencil to plastic and any style from classical to stencil art. The only sanction it has is that the ‘art’ within it must be driven by pop culture.

The reasons for the success of this style of art are multiple. The first is that it essentially moves in the same circles as popular culture. This art form is not maintained within the traditional institutions of art, and while there are exhibitions devoted to this style, it is generally distributed in the same channels as mainstream popular culture. The images are distributed through the magazine itself as well as on the skateboards, printed tee shirts, painted sneakers and CDs that are advertised within it. So rather than being part of the formal art world, this style has attached itself to the mechanisms and hierarchies of consumerism and fashion. The second reason for its success is the focus on previously established cultural icons. Lowbrow art is more a reproduction of the symbols from everyday life than a creation in itself. Symbols that are already understood are appropriated, redesigned or re-contextualised and sold back to the general public. Examples of popular topics for works are aliens, 1950’s drag racing, 1960’s cocktail parties, kitsch television celebrities, gothic horror and images of popular cultural icons.
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The power in using these images is that they are already understood by the public and therefore do not require formal training to comprehend. Cultural icons are taken from one context and placed into another, generating an image that can be conceptualised as art, but can likewise be understood by anyone with an interest in pop culture. The final reason for the success of lowbrow is due, not simply to the focus on everyday objects, but its inclusion of everyday art forms. Design, tattoo, graffiti, stencil art, knitting, clay and plastics, all are included.

The effect of these three points this has been to firstly, to open the arena to all-comers. By allowing diverse types of folk art to become part of the movement, through having its own distribution mechanism and by utilising commonly understood objects, it has essentially removed the power of art institutions, resulting in an internally legitimised system of production. Secondly, by taking on symbols of everyday life and simultaneously allowing for their representation through everyday urban forms, the movement has started to reify urban folk art as ‘real’ art. This fact is quite pertinent, as it has taken that which was traditionally a relatively mundane aspect of the cityscape, such as graffiti and tattooing, and raised it to the heights of art. Allowing those involved in its creation and appreciation a level of respect and affirmative cultural capital. Thirdly, due to the breadth of the work, and the multitude of urban cultures that it covers, it has given a common voice to the fractured stare of contemporary subculture. And it is this final point, the collective voice of creativity over that of individual subculture,
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which gives the largest hint as to the common culture of the researched urban communities.

Through magazines such as Juxtapoz, we can see how the multitude of individualised cultural perspectives can be brought together into a single cultural code. By encompassing the entirety of urban art and providing a common cultural perspective to the countless subcultures and individuals within the city, it essentially unites them. And through representing all local groups into one ‘art movement’, a common culture, and to a large degree a community, can be maintained.

On a very mundane level, the majority of respondents defined themselves as creative and to a large degree represented themselves as cultural producers. This generated a commonality of creativity across the spread of individuals, making for a cultural community of individuals who identified with being active in the manufacture of their own culture. On a much more philosophical level, identity and group belonging became an art in itself, with individuals essentially making the representation of their identity into an art form through their selection and modification of cultural icons. Art also had the social function of generating both the space, in the form of gallery openings, and the content, in the form of what to talk about. However, its largest contribution flows from this. Through generating a common theme across the numerous individuals and subcultures of the city, and simultaneously providing them with common ground, both geographically and
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culturally, the weak links necessary to generate a large and diverse community form.

So if subcultures are important for the development of the social networks within the city, and these networks go to generate the culture of the city, then their demise would indicate a decay in the amount and type of culture coming from cities. Muggleton showed that subcultures do appear to have less effect on individuals, but rather than cultural output declining, authors such as Florida (2002) have showed its increased significance within the urban environment. What will be argued is that a combination of art and creativity has become a subculture in itself, one that maps the urban social landscape in terms of identity, activity, sociality and common communication protocol.

Art and creativity as common identity

Scott Lash and Celia Lury’s book, *The Global Culture Industry* (2007) concerns itself with the changing nature of representation and how we now communicate through objects. The objectification of the cultural into items such as shoes and tee-shirts and how we use these objects to show affiliations is indicative of the shifting of consumer goods from advertising a specific ‘lifestyle’ to engineering distinction through selling ‘authentic’ and individualised products. Part of this movement has seen the idea of ‘art’ change from that which is aesthetic to that which is part of the everyday. As Karsten Schubert says, “Contemporary art has moved from being a marginal activity: its gone mainstream” (Lash and Lury 2007: 82), a fact that has enabled many to join ‘the art world’, but which has also
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changed its meaning and function. Art is no longer the realm of the eccentric; it has become the norm, the celebration of difference and creativity, and the area where the ‘authentic’ is manufactured.

Historically, art, as we know it, has only been around since the mid eighteenth century. Prior to that what we now call art was part of everyday life. Murals on chapels, oils of rich Flemish men, statues of gods and biblical figures all provided some practical function. From scene setting to ego satisfying, the objects that we call art, prior to the development of Kantian aesthetics, were more functional than artistic. With the development of the pure aesthetic, or the focus on the intrinsic and beatific value of art, came the movement from art as part of life, to art (and the artist) as separate from everyday life (Staniszewski 1995: 119). With this movement was born the idea of the artist as genius, as he who transcends reality and creates a vision of beauty from base raw materials. The general public has taken this theme as a fact, and artists have, for two hundred years, enjoyed the position of permissible eccentrics, essentially removed from society for the benefit of their work (Bourdieu 1996: 111). However, as entrance into the formal art world has, until recently, been limited to culturally elite European males, it might be more helpful to see art as a correlative of power, rather than just of beauty (Staniszewski 1995: 128). From this perspective art becomes dramatically tied into the social and cultural institutions surrounding it, rather than it being a pure aesthetic institution in itself.
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Howard Becker suggested that art is that which adheres to the conventions and schema of the ‘art world’ (2008: 28). By ‘art world’ he means the set of institutions, rules, support staff, financiers, suppliers, distributors and all others involved with the production and critique of the product. And a product becomes art when it successfully subscribes to the central tenets of this ‘art world’.

However, given the breakdown of traditional cultural institutions discussed above, the ideal of ‘the institute’ has become the plural and heterogeneous art market, home to public and private galleries, art dealers, small boutique sellers, cottage artists, designers, art and culture magazines and innumerable other large and small scale economic, cultural and social systems. Given this fracturing of singular modes of artistic production, the question of ‘what convention and schema are valid?’ arises. The answer is, of course, none and many, depending on the context.

In terms of the classic art markets of large galleries, the abstract artists might find buyers and so the schema and conventions of this art world would prevail. For the amateur oils painter the conventions of landscapes and sales at school fairs might provide their relevant schema. And for the printer of tee shirts, the local boutiques, urban trends and pop culture magazines would provide all the conventions necessary for them to produce their respective art. But another question quickly arises, and that is: are printed tee shirts and clichéd landscapes really art?

The key issue here is the validity of the activity. As mentioned above, one of the main reasons behind the growth of pop-surrealism has been its removal from
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can be read as an argument that extends beyond the traditional art institutions. As such it has its own distribution network, its own set of critics and has become a self-validating art movement with its own ‘art world’ and related set of conventions. The same could be said of amateur oils and most definitely of the printed tee shirt market, in that by removing themselves from the academy of traditional art, these activities then go about validating themselves as ‘real’ art works. Then there is also the issue of the medium. As per McLuhan’s (1964) argument, with different media come different messages, and the message from a tee shirt will not be the same as from an installation in a national gallery, so the validity of these productions and the cultures that critique them will also be separate. With all this in mind, it is quite easy to see how anything, once it complies with the set of conventions it is subscribing to, can become art, and in the case of pop-surrealism, the lowbrow culture of *Juxtapoz*, the boutiques, student galleries and alternative nightspots of Perth and Fremantle, it is urban culture that has *become* art.

Evidence of this can be seen in the way DJs and musicians are celebrated, the way in which complex tattoos from acclaimed tattooists are displayed and through individuals wearing formations of geometric patterns in the form of face piercings. The boutiques that the urbanites shop in, as well as their contents are presented as art; their new seasons become like exhibition openings and the products themselves are unique and supposedly imbued with the attention to detail that transforms the utilitarian into the artful. To add to this, the subjects of more than a few exhibitions have been graffiti, stencil art, skateboards and other...
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mundane urban forms. In short, the cultural markers of difference within the
urban environment have been reified as art forms, generating an environment
where *everything* comes to have aesthetic value, and in such an environment
*everything* becomes art. Featherstone calls this the aesthetisation of everyday life
(1990: 65) and considers it one of the hallmarks of post-modernity.

This blurring of the boundary between art and urban (sub)cultural production is a
product of the fracturing of universal symbolic hierarchies, and goes towards
generating a decentered individual as traditional symbolic value does not hold
(Featherstone 1995: 44). As such, it generates an overriding subjectivity, where
the social world becomes filled with a plurality of positions, particularly in terms
of aesthetics. The destructive aspect of this plurality of perspectives is to
theoretically generate a social system without a centre or without common social
themes, but the constructive aspect is to generate a freedom of choice and self-
reflexivity that, particularly when the openness or subjective nature of
contemporary art is taken into account, generates many possibilities for self-
expression.

This broadening of what constitutes ‘art’ has had an interesting effect in that it has
allowed for individuals who would normally have nothing to do with the art world
to suddenly be thrust into it. By owning a skateboard, having a tattoo or
identifying with a subculture, individuals are now taking part in the art world of
reified urbanity. And where previously their activities and objects had some
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subcultural worth, they now have artistic and very tangible cultural value, as can be seen below.

![Skateboards as art](image)

Figure 21: Skateboards as art (graffiti in background)

Another effect of the opening up of art has been the significant rise of individuals identifying with, and practising art. The table below shows a summary of all respondents in both communities and their respective affiliations with art and music. Out of the twenty-seven interviewees, twelve made a living out of careers associated with the arts, such as acting, photography and writing. Twenty-five out of the twenty-seven were actively involved in the creation of cultural artefacts, be it art, music or, as in one case, plastic dome houses. Out of the remaining two, one was the manager of a successful alternative nightclub and the last respondent did not provide any information on this topic.
This information shows a theme of creativity across the field, where all respondents, regardless of location or subcultural preference, were involved in some form of cultural creation, and almost half of them were making their livelihood out of these careers. But this theme does not just represent activity, it also represents the self-concept of the individuals. For example, as I started a group interview in Mount Lawley, I asked everyone at the table what they did, resulting in the following:

Erica: I make and sell dolls.
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Tim: I’m in a band.

Mark: Unpublished writer.

Tom: Artist, writer.

Tom2: Same.

These introductions all referred to the individual as artistic and were indicative of respondents’ perspectives towards themselves. As such, it was not just their career path that these people recognised as creative, it was their primary identification; they all represented themselves as artists. This showed that in a group environment the norm was to be an artist. On further questioning they also not only represented themselves, but also constructed their personal images of themselves as artists. So on a very real level, and across the board, the respondents utilised an identity template that revolved around the concept of being creative.

This identification with the individual as artist also played out on a group level. Consider the extracts below, which are taken from a spread of interviews from both Perth and Fremantle.

Karen (Perth): We have a house with four people in it. We’re all involved in art and music. Felix and Haley are musicians and are always playing gigs. I’m a photographer. I guess that’s the one thing about Perth that’s unique, there really
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seems to be a lot of creative people. I’ve met more creative
people here than anywhere else … I guess another thing is
that I was always a creative kid.

Steve: Is there any form of similarity amongst your friends?

Mike (Perth): Creative things, music, art, cinema. The people here
are more interested in the arts and naturally gravitate
towards here or Fremantle.

Zeeb (Fremantle): Community is the connections you have with
people, the creative stuff you make together and the stuff
you share.

Steve: Is there much of a commonality between friends?

Erica (Fremantle): Yeah, they’re all creative.

This applied not only to members of the ‘art’ community (which, one should remember is simply my personal descriptor), but to individuals in the hip-hop subcultures, punks, hippies and the vast majority of those who were met informally, regardless of cultural affiliation.

In terms of identification it clear that the individuals involved in the research have an affinity with all things creative. It is also clear that they see creativity as the
commonality between them and their associates. They live in places that attract 
creative people, they label themselves as creative, they label their friends as 
creative and they define community as the “creative stuff you make together”. On 
both an individual and a group level, creativity has become a symbol of 
identification and homology, and it is one that overrides the older conceptions of 
subcultural style. So in this case, urban art (or basically anything that allows the 
individual to be creative) has become one of the uniting factors of the urban 
community, where, regardless of subculture or group affiliation, all subscribe to 
the higher tenets of creativity.

Figure 23: Derek and Zeeb and plastic dome house. An example of variance 
in what ‘creativity’ can encompass.
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The theme of creativity is central to the construction of a common discourse. Be it real or imagined creativity the subject around which people come together and through which similarity can be found. As such it is the commonality amongst all members of the research and therefore equivalent to the common culture of a subculture. So it is art and creativity then that is the new cultural nexus. It generates a cultural totem around which diverse individuals from across the urban network can congregate and perform similar activities, or at the very least discuss them.

The huge amount of creativity is observable in the array of local exhibitions and products on offer and can also be seen in the number of less conventional projects, such as the production of plastic dome houses (above). But a much more practical and instrumental form of creativity comes in a form of generating space. The ingenuity of the local population in developing the common space, public events, gigs, raves, poetry nights, parties and the art and music necessary to stock these events is quite evident. But it is also indicative of the inherently social nature of this community, which will be examined in the next section.

I have so far established that there has been a change in art so as to generate a number of quasi-autonomous ‘art-worlds’. One of these involves the valorisation of mundane activities and has been taken up by many urban subcultures to generate a common network between them. This goes part way to explaining the seeming growth of heightened individualism running in parallel with greater
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levels of sociality (Chambers 2006: 99). In this case art and creativity allow for individual expression, but also, when the broader framework of urban street art is taken into account, generates a common practice and cultural nexus allowing for the many groups and individuals within an environment to come together. In this regard, art and creativity have become both an identity template and a commonality across the community; individuals call themselves artists and find similar interests in those around them by labelling each other as part of the same social movement. So to these people ‘being creative’ has become the property that defines both themselves and their community and as such proves to be one of the key mechanisms for establishing who is inside and who is outside of their community.

But art on its own does not adequately explain the identity politics and the community discourse that occurs around it. The next two sections will argue that while art is indeed bringing individuals together and acting as a cultural network hub, it is actually the common space and the common cultural protocol it creates that allow for the cross fertilisation of subcultural norms and the interaction of the population at large.

**Art as social space**

Art in Great Britain is sexy; the serpentine is now the sexy place to be. With the collapse of the royal family as a role model, royal events have lost their cache. Of course there are still going to be people around Ascot and Henley. But the rest look for the art
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gallery … Sting, Madonna and Mick Jagger: you’ll be seen: you want to be seen. Stella McCartney likes going to art galleries. We are not a very visual nation, but we have a superficial glamour (Lash and Lury, 2007: 81).

Sarah Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World* (2008) explores aspects of the formal art market from the perspective of an experienced and essentially unrestricted flâneur. In it she covers the buying, selling and marketing of art, as well as the lived reality of being part of this intensely hierarchical but constantly shifting socio-cultural organisation. Prior to reading it, one assumes that the focus will remain on art, but from quite early on it becomes evident that it is actually the social world surrounding the art, or having art as its focus, that is being examined. To a large extent it is the drinks, meetings, social occasions and the implications of the power plays occurring at these gatherings that Thornton is showing us. As she shows below, while there may be a belief in the centrality of art, to a large degree this is simply an agreed upon norm that is maintained as part of the established protocol of the art world.

If the art world shared one principle, it would probably be that nothing is more important than the art itself. Some people really believe this; others know it is de rigueur (Thornton 2008: xiii).
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Similarly, the Gordon’s Gin sponsored exhibitions, the enacting of the professional critic, the performance of the belligerent drunk artist, and the multitudes of patrons that hope to ‘touch the cloth’ of their favourite artist all refer to the social aspects of the art world and not the aesthetics.

The Venice Biennale feels like it should be a holiday experience, but it is actually an intense professional event that is so strongly social that it is hard to keep one’s eye on the art (Thornton 2008: xix).

And the chapter she devotes to the Venice art gathering, with its parties and high volumes of social interaction, goes on to show the party-like atmosphere that is the event.

In her study of the New York art market, Elizabeth Currid devotes a chapter to the significance of socialising. Using Silicon Valley as an example, she points to the importance of common social space and robust interaction in the development of successful diverse, but simultaneously common-minded, communities. Applying this to New York, she shows the necessity of serendipitous interaction to the construction of personal networks and also how these networks generate employment and give power to those who are more deeply entrenched in them. As Quincy Jones, the famous music producer, explained to her, “its not musicology, its sociology … it starts with
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the social” (Currid 2007: 80), implying that in order to succeed in music, the individual must be connected to the correct social network, access to which lies in socialising at the ‘right’ events. So not only is the social responsible for determining the legitimacy of certain aesthetics, as covered above, but it also seems to be as significant, if not more so, as the art itself.

While reviewing an exhibition, Currid noted the preference for individuals to socialise rather than to engage with the art on display. Rather than take preference with either the art or the socialising as supremely important, she starts to construct a duality involving, on one hand, the art as communicated culture, and on the other the gallery as common subcultural space.

The works of LaChappelle and Os Gemeos were impressive and startling, but the motley crew of gallery goers seemed less intent on the art and far more interested with interacting with each other. And so we come to an interesting point about these nodes of creative exchange. They operate on two distinct levels: the formal transfusion of information (the artwork the opening, the movie premiere, the rock show) and a place of exchange for the subculture that comes to the more formalised event (2007: 102)

For Currid, the art is the formal factor, or that which initially attracts the individuals to the site. However, it is the informal aspect, or the mingling, that
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builds the art scenes, which consequently supply the galleries. Lloyd illustrates this in his paper on bohemian cultures and local economies, where he shows that the population of artists, and artist ‘wannabes’, generate the surplus of casual labour necessary to staff the shops, cafés, bars and galleries of the locale. They also provide the artwork and the patronage necessary to populate the local cultural intuitions (Lloyd 2002). But more significantly, they provide the social basis and the networks that go to generate the creative climate, which generates the neighbourhood and therefore the socio-cultural environment conducive to making art.

Broadly defined, what we see in the Currid quote above is the twofold function of the exhibition, gig or movie premiere. The first relates to the culture itself, its reification and its movement in the population. Where, in the system of showing work at exhibitions or performing at gigs, the function of establishing a socially sanctioned space for the performance of cultural styles is served. This maintains the social order of elevating the artist above that of the audience as well as establishing and maintaining the institutions as culturally valid. An aspect of this is that it also maintains the cultural order of whatever style is being presented. Where, as aspects of a cultural style are replicated, reiterated and are spread from one venue to the next, so the style, regardless of it being punk music or abstract art, comes to be reified and, as Currid says, ‘transfused’ into the public arena. In this way the gallery or the music venue come to be places of cultural distribution,
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the artist gets accolades and the work they show gets communicated as a valid cultural form to society.

The second function of showing art relates to the way that these spaces are used by the surrounding social milieu to generate the networks that drive the symbolic economy of the city. This (informal) function serves to bring people together under a common culture, essentially uniting the disparate communities and groups of the locale, however briefly. The brevity of these occasions has been covered by a number of authors, namely Maffesoli (1996) and Malbon (1999), who show how common culture generates a ‘unicity’ of being, or a proximate relation that momentarily unites groups then quickly fades away. But in this temporary ‘communitas’ the superficial interactions that form the basis of the urban networks are performed, interactions which essentially begin the process of generating community networks. As with the social density necessary to create and maintain the creative ecosystem of Soho (Kostelanetz 2003) and downtown New York (Taylor 2006), it is the informal networks of artists, critics, patrons, suppliers, distributors and various other ‘scenesters’ that, through their interactions and machinations, generate the surrounding social milieu. And it is this social milieu that in turn generates the art, systems of reciprocity, commitment and patronage that go towards maintaining a community.

A practical example of this can be seen in any of the literature covering Andy Warhol’s Factory, where the social environment and the people ‘on the scene’
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generated the diverse but coherent background necessary to maintain the culture of creativity. Woronav, for example, shows how the constant partying created the space to perform the avant-garde. And with the sharing of space and common interest in the activities of the scene, came the social networks necessary to both sustain the artists and to bring the patrons together. Furthermore, though the interactions of so many different people in a common space with similar perspectives, a norm of creativity and performance was developed and maintained (Woronav 2000). In this instance, it was not necessarily the artists that maintained the social system. While they may have been the catalysts for the creativity, it was actually the people surrounding them that generated the cultural maelstrom which allowed them to be creative.

It seems then that the social aspect of these events could potentially dwarf their cultural aspect, and the exhibition could mean more as an institution for networking than for cultural development. This was supported by the average time patrons spent looking at art as opposed to socialising, which, from research, was roughly 1:5 respectively. Comments such as Alanna’s also hint at this. In the abstract below, which is taken from the Perth chapter, she shows how exhibitions are a normal part of her social calendar as well as describing what makes for a good one.

Steve: How about socialising?
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Alanna: There’s quite a few openings and after-parties. I’m a student, so we socialise mainly at exhibitions. The moon café attracts an artistic crowd, we go there after openings.

Steve: What makes for a good night?

Alanna: An engaging exhibition. I went to one, a guy that no one knew, there wasn’t great numbers there, but the art was good. Alcohol helps, it draws a crowd, and a diverse crowd is good. Good music too.

Similarly, Damian from Fremantle talked about the normalcy of exhibitions as a part of his social life and the importance of these institutions for the development of the scene.

Damian: I like going to art exhibitions at The Kerb in Northbridge, PICA, Red Box.

Steve: Are you a part of the community?

Damian: I like to think I’m becoming part of it. I attend exhibitions to be in the scene. Not that I want to be a scenester or anything, but I’ve exhibited a couple of times and people get to know you, and there is a scene. It’s not very publicised, but with Artrage and the new music and art scene developing, there’s a lot going on, it’s quite exciting. Its attracting heaps of people. It’s like the new cool place to be.
And finally, an extract from the focus group run at the end of the Fremantle research. Note, once again, how art becomes secondary to the social aspects of the evening, and particularly the relevance of the clique running the event, the free beer, the fact that more than one exhibition was on at the same time and the general lack of focus on art.

Elinore: Last night at the exhibition I was getting sick of the pretensions thing.

Phil: But there was free beer!

Karen: But did you like the concept?

Elinore: Yeah, nice concept, but the clique shat me.

Phil: They were ok! They’re just kids.

Gary: What’s this?

Karen: An exhibition last night.

Gary: Aiden’s or the other one. There was no beer at Aiden’s, he just had wine and cheesy things.

Phil: How was it?

Gary: The band was terrible but the DJ was good. She kept the dance floor full for most of the night. Everyone was there later on. I mean, Duke was there, so it must have been good.

Phil: See! I knew we should have gone there.
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Lee: Oh, it would have just been hippies.

This was exemplary of the attitude towards exhibitions. Most people saw them as opportunities for free drink, food and socialising, with the art as most definitely being secondary. These events were treated as spaces for socialising and catching up with people or possibly as somewhere to go prior to a big night out, and were particularly important to students or individuals with no income, as they generally provided free alcohol and food.

It seems then that the social aspect of the exhibition may be equally important, if not more so than the aesthetic aspect. And while a ‘good’ exhibition must have art it doesn’t necessarily have to have ‘good’ art. It is more important that it has a good turnout, but this is, once again, a reflection of the artist’s position within the social network of his or her own ‘art world’, which further reinforces the significance of the social. To attend someone else’s event is to gain social capital, not only in the form of meeting more people and widening one’s social network, but in terms of gaining social currency or standing, as can be seen in Alanna’s quote “I went to one [exhibition], a guy that no one knew, there wasn’t great numbers there”. The implications of this statement are that if the artist is not well known, socially, they will not have a good turn out. So if an individual has not been to many events, when it is their turn to host one, they will generally not get a good response.
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In his article on performing music, Rogers points this out that “you have to go to gigs to get gigs” (2008) and the same is true for exhibitions. In order to have a good event, be it exhibition, performance, or party, large amounts of social capital, or knowledge of the right sort of people, is required, and this is not a deep or personal knowledge. As with Granovetter’s thesis on the significance of weak links (1973), those who were more highly integrated into the art network, by having been to more events and presumably having met more people, were in better position to have a successful event. Conversely, as individuals gain social capital by going to events and meeting people, due to the dynamism of the community, if it is not maintained they also quickly lose it. So it is in their best interest to continue going to events. In this way the system of social capital reinforces itself, essentially forcing people to continue going out and either hosting or patronising events, or lose their position in, and knowledge of, the community.

The significance of socialising to art worlds, as well as to subcultures and other culture-scapes, has been established, and to an extent the social can be construed as at least as important as the actual art, especially when the testimonies of those ‘on the scene’ are taken into account. With statements such as, “This is all crap, lets get a drink”, coming from Calum while at an exhibition at PICA, it seems obvious that alcohol and socialising are paramount.
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To return to Thornton briefly, at the end of her introduction to *Seven Days*, she says that while some loathe the art world, she, in agreement with Charles Guarino sees it as: “[t]he place where I found the most kindred spirits – enough oddball, overeducated, anachronistic, anarchic people to make me happy” (Thornton 2008: xix). And while Calum was typically dismissive of the art, as were most of the respondents, he still felt ‘at home’ in this environment. So regardless of the lack of interest in art, there was still an attraction to the ‘type’ of people, the ambience and the sociality inherent in these events. While art is not typically expressed as the key reason for individuals going to exhibitions, it is most definitely a reason for their being involved in these communities, as it allows for freedom of expression, the cultural generation of both identity and community, access to a host of well networked and creative individuals, and, as we will see in the follow section, the ability to apply aesthetics to their own lives.

**Identity as art: the individual as art form**

Bauman’s *The Art of Life* (2008), an adjunct to his previous writings on liquid modernity, and the transient careers, lives and loves it entails, tells the story of how we, as a society, have been taken away from the peculiarities of the localised or grand narratives of identity and put in the position where we must construct our personae. Though still immersed in relatively strict matrix of allowable identities, the contemporary individual is, according to Bauman, continually in the process of making their life into a work of art, as they construct their identity to reflect both their changing circumstances and the changing nature of the symbols of identity around them. In this way the contemporary individual has become an
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artist, actively making themselves into something that is unique, authentic,
publicly admired and a reflection of their internal aesthetic. But, as is usual for
Bauman, the negatives of this outweigh the positives, as can be seen below.

To practice the art of life, to make one’s life a ‘work of art’
amounts in our liquid modern world to being in a state of
permanent transformation, to perpetually redefine through
becoming (or at least trying to become) someone other than one
has thus far been. ‘Becoming someone else’ amounts, however, to
ceasing to be who one has been thus far; to breaking and shaking
off one’s old form as a snake shakes off its skin or a shellfish its
carapace; to rejecting, one by one, the used up personae – shown
by the steady flow of ‘new and improved’ opportunities on offer to
be worn out, too tight or not just as fully gratifying as they have
been in the past. To put a new self on public display and admire it
in the mirror and the eyes of others, one needs to remove the old
self from one’s own and other people’s sight, and possibly also
from one’s own memory. When engaged in ‘self-defining’ and

According to Bauman, as we build we also destroy and the inevitable outcome of
this constant construction and deconstruction of identity is a humanity devoid of
meaning, as we forever look for the next cultural turn to further aid in the building
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of our essentially vacuous identities. This text ends on the note that though our lives are inherently pointless, due to the lack of depth and solidity, groping for meaning in an essentially inane cultural schema is what ‘the art of life’ is actually about. So while on one hand he is defaming the art of life, he is also saying that it is a social fact and the individual construction of identity is, for good or ill, how we live our lives today.

In a similarly pessimistic fashion, Christopher Lasch shows how, in ‘the narcissistic society’, life has become a work of art and a personal masterpiece (1979: 166), but rather than causing a decentred individual, what this is doing is manufacturing an insincere and superficial individual. For Lasch, the individual is building a portrait that can withstand the insults of others and is designed more out of fear than personal admiration. The identities that the narcissist, and by this he means the contemporary individual, constructs are not real, but designed to imitate the untouchable identities of the heroes that we, as a society, emulate. And the product of this is a type of sociality based on fear, superficiality and ultimately self-obsession (1979: 155-179).

Both of these perspectives join the body of literature that show the individual construction of identity as detrimental to greater society, generally by creating a meaningless cultural void (Hochschild 2003; Sennett 2006). A far less negative perspective however, comes from Paul Willis, who in the introduction to his text on ethnography shows how the building of social realities and the construction of
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personal understandings of culture is an artful project, and rather than constituting an empty and ‘unhealthy’ lifestyle it is simply the way that identity is produced (2000: xviii). From Willis’ perspective, people are constantly active in the construction of their identities, appropriating objects from around them. It is in the way they take ownership of objects, and whatever objects they make their own, that makes them who they are. This is an ongoing, and very social process, and is quite reminiscent of symbolic interactionist approaches, as in Howard Becker’s writing on the internalisation of the social construction of the marijuana smoker (Becker 1963), where individuals learn the social process from those around them. But Willis’ perspective also has overtones of post-structural symbolic fragmentation, in that there are multiple perspectives inherent in contemporary social reality, which generate multiple possibilities of what each individual takes from the social interaction, as discussed above and by Muggleton (2000). From this perspective the individual takes meaning from those around them and to an extent succumbs to their social stereotypes, but they do so in a symbolic economy where meaning is not exact. So the individual actively builds their ideas of what objects mean and through taking on or discarding these objects as relevant or irrelevant, so they construct their identities.

A similar argument comes from Featherstone, who, rather than pointing to the individual construction of identity as problematic, sees it instead as a product of post-modernity, where individuals must build their identity out of the near infinite range of cultural product available to them. The ‘aesthetication of everyday life’
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(Featherstone 1990: 86) denotes the way in which common culture has come to be seen as holding symbolic meaning beyond its function. The roots of this lie in the way that culture has been affected by the dissolution of singular understanding of symbols, resulting in floating signifiers, or that which can mean whatever the subject imagines it to mean. The practical side of this is that the meanings of objects change with the perspective of the individual, and if the individual imbues an object with a significant aesthetic then it becomes significant. In this way the utilitarian can become art, at least to the beholder.

As life goals and life structure have become relatively free-floating and the significance of engineering one’s own biography has increased, so has the imbuing of one’s own life with meaning. Rather than adopting pre-constructed lifestyles, individuals are taking that which is significant from the surrounding culture and moulding it into a coherent singular identity in an attempt to generate an ‘organic unity’ (Shusterman 1988 347, in Featherstone 1995 45), which make for a whole or a unified project. In this way the quotidian of existence becomes part of the aesthetic that makes lives ‘special’, and by placing meaning in the fabric of everyday life, so it becomes part of an identity repertoire. When this ensemble is constructed and presented to the world, so the individual becomes the artist and their life an artwork. Simply said, the contemporary cultural environment has made the meaning of objects non-absolute and therefore available for appropriation and reconstitution. And in the gathering of these
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objects and putting them together to represent themselves (the same way that a painter uses different strokes to construct a painting), so identity becomes art.

The overriding nature of this theme was quite apparent from the field, with individuals seemingly gaining more satisfaction and respect from actively constructing their identity than from more traditional status symbols, such as wealth. And while the themes of artful creation of identity may be a general theme within society, among the research population it was so apparent and reinforced to such an extent as to make it a defining feature of the community. This was particularly evident at events, such as the ‘noise gig’ and the poetry reading from the Perth chapter as well as the parties from the Fremantle chapter. At these events there was a norm of distinction, from both non-subcultural society as well as from each other, as individuals wore clothes that generally represented some form of subcultural affiliation, but not to the extent of a singular or overarching style or in the same way as anyone else at the event. A particularly good example is the image below, taken during an exhibition at Spectrum gallery. Note the diversity of the dress, the inconsistencies within the sartorial uniform of the group, but also the way their style, when taken as a group, does not comply with the current trends in street wear and as such goes towards making a style of subcultural bricolage.
Figure 24: Subcultural bricolours

Their ‘look’ becomes a style without style, or, more aptly, anything that is resistant to the norm, as previously mentioned by Alanna, who defines the common dress code as:

The typically arty look. Bohemian, eclectic, mismatching. Most people comb the op shops for their ‘look’. It’s the cool of the uncool, patterns that don’t match.
Like Polhemus’ ‘supermarket of style’ (1996) it seems as if all the icons of subcultural and generally urban culture have been put into the set of possible icons available, allowing them to actively construct their ‘image’ out of anything that has gone before them. This utilisation of cultural icons is no different to the appropriation of swastikas by the punk movement or the taking up of working boots by skinheads (Hebdige 1979) but at the same time it is distinct in the manner in which the meaning is constructed on an individual level. Rather than there being an overarching, or explicit style, the style is actually generated by the individual. And while the cultural system surrounding the individual already has sets of meaning for the objects they use, it is the ensemble and the reconfiguration, or the sum of these cultural icons resulting in the presentation of a distinct individual, that is unique.

Evidence of this can be seen in analysis of the culture industry, particularly in the shifts in marketing of mass-produced products. Nike for example, regularly advertise in Juxtapoz and in June 2007 release a limited edition set of sneakers with 4 separate prints to choose from. Adidas and converse also followed this trend by releasing similar sets of limited issue products (Lash and Lury 2007: 148), and there has been a general shift towards individualisation of product, as manufacturers become aware of the power of distinction over similarity, or as Lash and Lury call it, the shift from “identity to difference” (Lash and Lury 2007 5). This movement, from a product giving the purchaser a set identity to being something that sets them apart from anyone else, is indicative of the significance
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of distinction in contemporary urban relations. A point which is supported by the attractiveness of the ‘limited edition’ and the exclusive product.

Similarly, the demand for personalised culture is also highly regarded and great emphasis is placed on knowing about, and to an extent ‘owning’, or being the first to hear about, new cultural product. Occurring more in the informal, participant-observation, spaces of the research, there was a constant reference to music and film. The numerous conversations regarding personal opinions of culture, why one movie was better than other, the preference for a certain style of directing, hours spent looking for a unique tee-shirt print or shoe and, above all else, the valuing of anything obscure, new and most importantly ‘different’, all point to a culture obsessed with the maintenance of personal distinction. As Hailey, the shop assistant from Perth said “Fashion is so homogenised in most stores that people will pay for something a bit different … They’d rather have one special thing than a hundred useless things”.

Individuals are essentially forced to maintain a position on popular culture and to know about specific type of music, film and other media. They generally must have a perspective on cultural icons or if they do not, must be able to explain why. And while, as per the individuation of style, there is not exactly a uniform taste, each individual must have a preference for something and should, most importantly, be able to support their preference. Mike for example, reflects his musical taste as being quite ‘mainstream’. He uses this to establish social distance
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from the ‘alternative’ scene and to maintain individual autonomy, but he is also highly capably of qualifying his cultural preference.

Mike: I don’t like a lot of the music that people listen to. Its all very indi, and non-emotional. There’s almost a fear of emotion, and fear of being corny, which I don’t mind.
People like things that are adventurous and unique, but I like rock and roll. They like bands that stand out.

Steve: So would anyone listen to ACDC?

Mike: Not really, occasionally an Elvis fan shows up, and that’s quite refreshing. But generally it’s the more obscure stuff that gives you cred [credibility]. But I like Oasis and You Am I, and that’s kind of looked at snobbishly by art students and stuff.

Hailey from one of the Perth Boutiques also comments on the significance of distinction.

Hailey: Yeah, as soon as everyone knows about something it’s not cool anymore. That’s just the way it works. Ten years ago it would have taken a while to get uncool, but these days, with internet and stuff, I know about everything that’s happening in London in L.A, everything. There’s no secrets
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anymore. As soon as there’s a few people doing something really exciting it blows out and it’s gone. Everything is pretty expendable.

Steve: Are you in one scene or many? Are there scenes?

Hailey: Yeah, definitely. Like the fashionistas, the indi kids, I feel silly saying this.

Steve: Why?

Hailey: No one wants to be labelled. They all want to feel special.

Steve: So there are scenes, but all mixed up?

Hailey: Yeah, but there’s no real animosity between them.

Steve: In my day there was a divide between alternative and mainstream, does that exist anymore?

Hailey: Yeah, but it’s more to do with the individual. Like if someone I knew liked something commercial, it’s funny, it’s ok. If you love Beance it’s not a problem any more. We embrace the tacky. But if you only like Beance then something’s completely wrong with you.

Individualism, or the appearance of being separate and essentially self-validating, was the ‘style’ that made individuals part of these communities. To be seen to blindly follow the dictates of a set value system, regardless of its subcultural perspective, was viewed negatively. Furthermore, the ability of the individual to effectively generate an image and to adequately sustain it was rewarded, while the
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inauthentic, or those that failed to adequately perform their role, were reprimanded and labelled as failures.

There is then a common theme of individualism running through urban creative communities. All respondents were in some way attempting to remake their life so as to be an artwork. They were not following what they considered to be the traditional paths in life and were generally not concerned with financial security. Their focus was instead becoming what they saw as ‘their own person’ and involved being very active in the construction of their identities. This, instead of a formal career, was the life project of respondents.

In this way life became art, where, as individuals shopped for exclusive tee shirts, looked for hard to find cultural forms to identify with and tried to appear distinct through generating fanciful life paths, they were making their life into something special and meaningful. Traditional art became simply another way of generating this distinction, as it is personal, an expression of one’s perspective, exclusive, most definitely belongs to the individual and can be admired by others. From the many symbols around them, and from those they create, these people construct new meaning and work at making themselves significant by making their life into a masterpiece. They utilise the culture around them to manufacture new biographies and try, above all else, to avoid the trapping of someone else’s understanding culture, and therefore of someone else’s life.
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Culture as communication

The final utilisation of art is in the way that it acts as a common communication mechanism for those throughout the urban landscape. This basically works through a mixture of the integration of subcultures, or the omnivorousness of youth cultures (Carrabine and Longhurst 1999), allowing for a common aesthetic to be formed amongst them, and also through the common discussion and critique of cultural form. In an article on the Brisbane alternative scene, Ian Rogers (2008) shows that what is considered ‘alternative’ has changed and how contemporary subcultures overlap to generate themes of alternativeness. This has allowed individuals within varied subcultures to communicate about similar objects with a reasonably similar cultural perspective. These ‘scenes’ occur through the interaction of various subcultural groups but are more abstractly generated through the interaction of the cultural institutions within an area (Straw 2005).

One well-documented example of a scene is that of Austin, Texas (Shank 1994). Here the varying types of music are shown to overlap in terms of the sites they play, management, channels of distribution and patrons, but more generally in the cultural institutions of the locale. And though the musical styles were considered to be reasonably separate they still influenced each other and still obeyed the cultural norms of the area. In this way, key cultural and social institutions were shown to be the decisive elements in the production of localised commonalities within the music and also a localised interpretation of culture, across the board.
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Locally, one such institution is the radio station, RTR. Initially associated with the University of Western Australia, this station is now positioned in the heart of Mount Lawley and draws patronage from the majority of people in the communities with whom I was involved. In promotional material the station advertises itself as ‘the sound alternative’ and attempts to live up to this descriptor by only playing obscure, or traditionally alternative, forms of music. The range of music varies from 1930’s organ to avant-garde composition. The station also supports local music by regularly hosting a wide range of events from death metal shows to comedy nights, as well as the range of performance and music types in between. Given the widespread appeal of this station, 93,000 listeners, 8% of the over 15’s population (www.rtrfm.com.au) and the variation of cultures, lifestyles and forms of music presented, it is clear that it functions as a cultural nexus or crossroads for its listeners, allowing them to access the wide range of ‘alternative’ culture across the board.

A similar institution is that of the free street press. Every Thursday, thousands of magazines are distributed at every venue where there may be a potential musician, artist, poet or someone who is possibly interested in live music or performance. These magazines are free and have a circulation of 40,000 . They contain articles on bands, galleries, DJs, reviews of local events, interviews, IT information, art, fashion as well as a list of every event occurring in the greater metropolitan area. Once again these papers provide a cultural crossroads in that they do not segregate different cultural forms but have everything in the one publication.
The effect of these institutions is not only to advertise events, but also to generate broad cultural knowledge across the cityscape. Where by listening to radio or reading street press, individuals can become aware of, and potentially understand, other distinct cultural forms. In this way an awareness of urban culture is achieved, allowing individuals the cultural space for discussion of these forms. Essentially this works in the same way as the broadening of art to also include street culture and in doing so creates a common discourse around which individuals can communicate. The following is a recording from a party in Fremantle. I was initially talking to one person, when a second, and then a third person interrupted us.

Steve: You like the DJ?
Person1: Yeah, drum and bass is all right. I like this song, but he usually breaks it up with other tracks.
Person2: Yeah, it’s good eh?
Person1: But it can get a bit much.
Person2: Yeah, I don’t like it all the time, but usually there’s a second room you can go to, like at Earth Dance [local annual forest rave]. That was good. Drum and bass for half an hour is ok then I go to the trance tent.
Person1: What was it like this year?
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Person2: It was ok; too many hippies and the bogans came and messed it up.

Person3: You talking about earth dance? It was packed, it’s gone all commercial.

Person1: I hate the hippy thing. Trance is crap, its all kids and glow-sticks.

Person2: But at least they’re putting on shows.

Person3: The whole rave thing annoys me now, its only good when you’re on drugs.

Person1: Yeah, I know what you mean; I generally just go to gigs now.

Person2: I saw Cinema Prague [an old local band] at The Railway last week.

Person3: Aw, I wanted to go to that, I saw it in XPress [local street press].

Person2: I heard Tim [the drummer] interviewed in RTR last week.

Person1: They were wicked.

Person3: I don’t know, wouldn’t they be crap without Rex [the old bass player].

Person2: It was only punk anyway.

Person1: No it wasn’t. It’s like Zappa.

Person3: What’s wrong with punk?
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As can be seen from the above the range of topics varies across three separate areas, starting with electronic music and raves to local gigs and ending with punk. In this way broad subcultural knowledge can be seen to provide a common discourse for engaging with others. In addition to this, as per the previous section, individuals are continually looking for culture they can appropriate as their own. This requires knowledge of these areas, which in turn generates fields of conversation. Note the extracts from below, both are regarding popular culture, the first is a discussion on the languages used in *Star Wars* and the second covers a range of topics starting with Douglas Adams’ *Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* and ending with existentialism. Both of these conversations show how common culture and its critique go towards generating the communication norms of the community.

Phil: Ewoks [Star Wars characters] were dodgy. They were just to sell lots of teddy bears to kids.

Mike: How come Han Solo could talk to Chewie in English but Chewie could only respond in his language?

Gary: Pure racism!

Elinore: I think its egalitarian.

Jane: Wookies can only make guttural noise, like dogs, which was what he was representing, a loyal support to an otherwise unscrupulous and morally bankrupt character.
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Elinore: Yeah. He was his conscience and the better side of Solo, the side that valued friendship. Like the good friend in Shakespeare tragedies. They show the human side of the calculating hero.

Gary: Are you sure it was a he?

Mike: Actually, it’s probably an intonated thing, like Mandarin.

Matt: Has anyone seen the new *Hitchhikers*?

Tom: Yeah its crap.

Tom2: You can tell they wrote it after Adams died.

Matt: Nah, he wrote the script.

Tom: No way!

Matt: Serious!

Tom2: Then Adams is crap.

All boys: Laugh

Erica: What are they talking about?

Karen: I think its *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*.

Erica: That’s a stupid series, and its all based on Kurt Vonegut.

Tom: No its not, Adams was a programmer and sci-fi head.

Karen: Well so was Vonegut, into sci-fi that is.

Matt: No he wasn’t, he was like Harold Robins, he sounds historically correct, but makes up crazy stories about things that couldn’t have happened but sound real.

Karen: What about *The Sirens of Titan*?
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Tom: *I Heart Huckerbees* reads like a Tom Robins book.

Matt: Is that the existentialist movie?

Karen: Yeah.

Tom: That was rubbish, there is only one existentialism and that’s the Bertolt Brecht or Albert Camus, ‘the world is grinding me down and I’m gonna kill an Arab’, sort of existentialism.

Erica: But what about the freedom and beauty that pointlessness entails?

Tom: Freedom to kill yourself – laughs.

What we have here is a common discourse based on knowledge of contemporary pop culture. This knowledge and validation of certain cultural forms once again provides the commonality across which the diverse range of individuals within the communities can communicate. In this way the culture of the city provides the common protocol through which individuals can communicate, or as Bourdieu would call it the “field”, and the specifics of dialogue that these individuals take on as their own becomes their “habitus” (1979: 170), or encompassing set of personal perspectives that essentially defines the worldview of the individual. In the field, opinions may differ on the value of objects, but all are discussing the *same* objects, and it is this that generates the shared cultural understanding amongst community participants. To use Lex’s terms, the common cultural understanding allows for individuals to unite under a shared ideology, and it is this that allows for easy communication between community members.
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So the language of cultural analysis, when combined with the spreading of art to encompass urban and popular culture, generates a shared currency of common knowledge that brings these people together. By allowing individuals to share common experience, or at the very least to discuss cultural objects in a common fashion, a protocol has been established that allows for a very diverse range of individuals and groups to become involved in a singular discourse of cultural production and critique.

With the concept habitus comes the notion of distinction, or the separation of cultural groups from one another based on the symbolic struggle over the legitimacy of signs of culture (Bourdieu 1979: 244-256). The way that the same cultural norms unite one group and simultaneously segregate them from other groups will be explored more fully in the next chapter, which will be focused on the significance and the practice of distinction to the formation of community. In it the nature of in-groups and out-groups will be examined, as will the generally negative views of Perth by the respondents, the separation of the urban and the suburban as a symbolic device, and the distinction between respondents and the ‘mainstream’ population.

**Conclusion**

This chapter attempted to show the cultural linkages between the individuals involved in the researched communities. Initially opening with a review of the fractured nature of contemporary culture and cultural movements, it showed how
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art has become a category that has become so open as to serve as a unifying function across the urban landscape.

With the reification of urban culture as an art form, the institutions of art have opened up to include items that are applicable and understandable to subcultural urbanites. Similarly, the art world has spawned new institutions to accommodate these changes. The new student galleries and the less formal exhibitions occurring at boutiques and cafés are a sign that art as a project is more than an exclusive or elitist activity and also that the ways in which it can be ‘done’ has become plural and not so limited as to have only one ‘type’ of gallery. The growth of the space in which art can be displayed has also seen an increase in its supply, or possibly an increase in supply led to more spaces for its showing, but regardless of which came first, it shows a general raising of interest in artistic activity. And while the many ways in which art can be manufactured, and the multiple aesthetics art has broken into, shows a general fracturing of the field, it also shows a potential spreading of the art network, especially when taken with the increase in its popularity. What I have argued above is that the field of art, or rather creativity, has become a cultural norm that transcends traditional subcultural boundaries. It has, in effect, generated a common protocol across many of the divergent groups within the city, enabling a wide array of interconnected activities to occur. This has spawned a very large loose network of individuals that traverses large areas of the city, essentially uniting disparate groups into a common ‘scene’ or community.
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The spaces of performance, or the galleries, cafés, boutiques and pubs, serve the dual function of providing a space for art to be displayed but also acts as a social space, in that they attract individuals to them, generating the potential for social activity. To a large degree the social factor seems to be at least as significant, if not more so, than the art, as in these spaces individuals are more intent on conversing than observing, and place as much emphasis on being observed as observing. Respondents have been shown candidly commenting on the significance of the exhibition (or live music) circuit to their social life and the, not irrelevance, but the reduced importance of the art or music on display. The key significance of the exhibition space was to provide a social nexus where the surrounding subcultures can congregate, intermingle and join in the shared ‘puissance’ (Maffesoli 1996: 22) of the event. However, while the patrons may not openly admit to spending much time with the art, it is here that the norms and regulations of specific cultural styles are developed, maintained and passed on. It is also at these events where the specifics of cultural identification played out, as individuals openly showed their approval or disapproval of specific styles by attending or not attending specific spaces.

The boundaries of these communities were not explicit, and involved vague definitions of being creatively active rather than hard and fast rules. But one key theme was the way that individuals consistently defined themselves as artists, writers and so forth, which showed a general identification with being a cultural
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producer, regardless of subcultural affiliation or actual product. In this regard being creative was a mechanism for indicating belonging to, or association with, the creative, or broadly subcultural urban community.

A second way that creativity was evident was in the manufacturing of very distinct biographies and the individual construction of unique and ‘authentic’ self-images. Here individuals were very active in representing themselves as distinct from both one another as well as from the rest of the population. Using everything from the personal election of various styles of clothing to the taking up of their own set of cultural forms and genres, these individuals were basically trying to construct their own cultural schema, as opposed to taking up a pre-existing one. Similarly, they were also very active in the definitions of their lives as projects, replacing traditional careers with creative or adventurous ones. As such they were treating their lives like the works of art, attempting to sculpt truly individual identities and life stories by utilising and appropriating the cultural tools at their disposal. This form of creativity - the creativity of designing an individualised lifestyle and self-image - though not typically associated with art, has become an art form in itself. One that is recognised, applauded and, if performed badly, ridiculed. It is also this highly individualised form of expression, essentially ‘enforced individualism’, that typically defined respondents’ attitudes towards their perceptions of themselves and those around them.
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As individuals must actively construct their own identity so too must they have knowledge of the styles of others. The effect of so much focus on the intricacies of identity and cultural product is to generate a population that has a huge knowledge of popular and contemporary culture. Not only did they have knowledge of what was popular, they could critique it and talk about in a way that showed complete knowledge of their field. As such, the knowledge that enabled them to side with one cultural form and dismiss another was also the knowledge that allowed them to communicate across subcultural boundaries. Popular culture and the review of it provided the wide array of individuals with a common theme for discussion and a common protocol to discuss it in. So art, popular culture, music, literature, film and the way in which they are critiqued went towards maintaining an open dialogue with others in the community, but as with any form of cultural capital also has the double function of generating a field of knowledge that only those practiced in it can utilise, or of essentially limiting who can join in and who can not.

In conclusion, art, and what it has become, has generated a cultural schema that is open to many forms of cultural activity. As such it is has spawned a system that is broad enough to provide space to the many divergent groups across the city. By doing this it has created both a social norm, or a stereotype, of the artist, and a community of those wishing to identify with the artistic lifestyle, regardless of subcultural style or cultural heritage. The spaces that it is performed or shown in provide the social spaces where the superficial and transient communications
Art as common culture and context for socialisation

from the previous chapter can occur and where individuals from the many groups around the city can ‘cross pollinate’. In the discussion of art, as well as the cultural material related to it, a common protocol is established that maintains a reasonably open discourse between members of this networked, individuated and ‘fuzzy’ community. However, no cultural system is open to all, and it is this exclusion of others, as well as the elevation of community members and the corresponding denigration of those ‘outside’ the community, that will be addressed in the next chapter.
Self-righteousness distinction and community

Chapter 9: Self-righteousness, distinction and community

Introduction

The previous chapter showed how art and creativity were used as a vehicle for generating commonality amongst the many diverse groups in the city. However, aspects of this could be viewed as overly celebratory or favourable, as not all groups were brought together through art. What this chapter will show is how creativity is used to not only bring people together, but also to limit entrance into the community.

This limiting function was maintained through the performance of ‘the bohemian’ as an identity template and then through the denigration of those who do not adopt this personality type. The effect of this was to generate a range of perspectives that defined community members, all of which centred on the polarity between ‘bohemian’ and ‘mainstream’, which grew into a dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’. As such this was a form of othering, where communities manufacture myths of both inclusion and exclusion to mark the boundaries of cultural territory. Studies of community have previously noted the necessity of manufacturing an ‘other’, as this allows for the community to define itself as distinct from the surrounding social milieu. The self-righteousness and sense of superiority that this engendered has typically been seen as inherently negative (Elias and Scotson 1994), in that is usually disempowers one group while empowering another,
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resulting in inter-group tensions and the pejorative labelling in certain aspects of the social system.

What this chapter will do is to re-examine the self-righteousness of community members and demonstrate how, rather than it being inherently negative, it is actually quite productive, in the sense that it helps to produce community. This chapter will show that it is the celebration of distinction, as well as self-righteousness that comes from myths of superiority, that maintain these communities as coherent groups. It will also demonstrate that while those outside the group are labelled as inferior, these labels have little effect outside the group and only have internal function. As such, the self-righteousness of community members and the positioning of others as below them have very few ramifications other than generating strong community rhetoric and powerful consolidation devices.

By way of exploring this assumed superiority and examining how this arrogance came to be, the bohemian, as an ideal type, will be explored. After this the roles of art, passion, work and nihilism will be examined to show how this group maintains their internal logic of cultural superiority over others. However, prior to this, a brief overview of the necessity of distinction for the development of community will be presented.
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Arrogance and othering as community resources

As seen in an earlier chapter, Elias and Scotson’s *Established and Outsiders* (1994) showed how the constructed ‘truths’ of one part of the community functioned as a tool whereby one group could dominate another. To recapitulate briefly, in this text the authors showed how the *established* population of a village manufactured myths about their own superiority, describing new arrivals as the antithesis of the model citizen; that is dirty, unfriendly, uneducated and uncultured. By continually reinforcing these representations through praise gossip (celebrating virtuous qualities of the established) and blame gossip (denigrating the new arrivals) the established came to be in a position of social power where they could prevent outsiders from gaining positions of influence in local social activities, and in some instances exclude them from social networks entirely. As a product of this the outsiders did not socialise as much as the established, and therefore lacked the ‘social capital’, or the interconnectedness, necessary to develop their own set of norms. The result of this was that they accepted the lowly position placed on them.

By taking the established-outsider configuration as an example we can see how myths, and processes of exclusion are used to maintain dominance over others. More complexly, through seeing how the norms of the community are manufactured to create hierarchies, we can see the constructed nature of community norms, how these constructions go towards generating the symbolic
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schemes of a community and also how they generate what is symbolically significant for that population.

From this perspective, a community can be seen as more of a symbolic form than a geographical one, where individuals within that community will perceive their environment using a particular schema, and, as only those within the community will have this perspective, this schema will provide them with the limits of their community. As Anthony Cohen says:

Community exists in the minds of its members, and should not be confused with geographic or sociographic assertions of ‘fact’. By extension, the distinction of communities, and thus, the reality of their boundaries, similarly lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms. As we have seen, this reality of community is expressed and embellished symbolically (1985: 98).

Furthermore, this schema will be different from that of surrounding communities, not out of any ‘natural’ development but more simply just to be distinct. With this distinction from others comes belonging, and from that comes identity.

It [community] creates a sense of belonging, of identity – and, by the same token, of difference to others. It does so in ways which
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may well be unperceived by those others and which, hence, cannot
be easily attacked or subverted by them (1985: 53)

So in the development of rituals and myths of community, such as the
exclusionary and segregatory practices of Elias and Scotson’s example, we see
how distinction comes to be a central part of community creation. Where, by
removing themselves from others, creating rationales about why this separation is
‘natural’ and then becoming not only aware of, but also sensitive to, these
manufactured logics, distinct communities are formed.

This example contains very strong themes of dominance, where distinctions
between groups exist to allow for authority to be wielded, but this does not have
to be the case. In the final chapter of Community Studies, Bell and Newby argue
that while some analysts perceive community ‘power’ in terms of zero sum or
elitist approximations, it is more apt to see power-plays, both inter and intra
community, as being quite plural. And rather than there being one site of
contention, there will generally be numerous ones, resulting in a system of
community power where there are multiple areas of conflict and no one group is
absolutely in control of every aspect (1971: 218-249).

As seen in earlier chapters, this idea of plurality was supported by empirical work
elsewhere in the social sciences. For example, this has been noted in psychology
as a “relative superiority necessary to well being” (Headey and Wearing 1988),
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where in order to uphold one’s egoic stability and positive outlook, individuals position themselves *above* others. How they do so, and the objects they choose to mark this division, is arbitrary. Meaning and significance is made up to suit the situation and each scheme has its own internally constructed logic; more imagined than factual, but real in affecting the outlook of the individual and community. In terms of the social sciences this sense of imagined superiority is particularly evident in the literature on ethnicity, nationalism and other discussions on cultural identity (Anderson 1983; Said 1985; Kedourie 1993; Hall and Du Gay 1996; Fenton 1999; Back and Solomos 2000), where individuals are seen as constructing their uniqueness based on community/place/ethnic/cultural attachment, which is based largely on a constructed other, or an imagined difference between themselves and others.

In terms of the fieldwork, there was also a sense of pride coming from community membership, which generally came across as quite an arrogant position over those *not* in the community. However, rather than this leading to physical dominance or political power struggles, it remained in the symbolic realm (Bourdieu 1979: 244-256) and actually had little effect on those outside of the community. So while those ‘outside’ were used to bolster the identities of those within the group, they remained oblivious to this fact. And rather than this form of symbolic dominance actually hurting anyone it seemed that the imagined differences between groups were generally constructive, in that they engendered a strong sense of belonging and identity formation, while at the same time generating the symbolic boundaries
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and myths of both ‘other’ and ‘self’ necessary for community to exist. So, to a large degree, it was the self-righteousness of community members that actually sustained the community; the belief that they were better than others allowed them to validate their own communal existence.

What follows is an exploration of this arrogance in terms of how it was visible within the research groups and in particular how this has come to be through the template of ‘the bohemian’; the archetypal aloof and poverty stricken artist.

**The development of the bohemian as ‘other’**

Howard Becker’s *Art Worlds* shows the social structures and conventions upon which art is based. These include the “support staff”, such as gallery workers, paint makers, funding bodies and the general public, who internalise the rules of the art world and accept the authority of the expert’s opinions as to exactly what ‘art’ entails. But there is another convention, that of the artist themselves. If, on a very rudimentary level, art is that which only an ‘artist’ can produce (Becker 2008: 14), then the artist is, to a large degree, accepted as a visionary by society at large. As such they come to be outside of the norms that generally apply to all individuals, or as Becker says:

> At an extreme, the romantic myth of the artist suggests that people with such gifts cannot be subjected to the constraints imposed on other members of society; we must allow them to violate rules of decorum, propriety and common sense everyone else must follow
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or risk being punished. The myth suggests that in return society
receives work of unique character and invaluable quality (2008:
15).

So by relieving the artist of quotidian responsibilities we are in turn guaranteeing
our right to works of art, which we, as a society, deem to be significant.

Bourdieu also sees the contemporary artist as more of a predefined social
caracter; as the embodiment of those ‘on the fringes’ of society. The ‘bohemian’
is ambivalent and escapes classification: they are simultaneously near to the poor
but separated from them by art; they are opposed to the bourgeoisie but
intertwined with the rich; and they are perpetually involved with experimentation
and new social forms (1996: 56). However, the significance of the bohemian lies
in this polarity, as, when the ‘social personality’ of the artist as bohemian came to
be, so the new face of art, as that which is resistant to authority but simultaneously
part of the established order, was born.

[t]he invention of the pure aesthetic is inseparable from the invention
of a new social personality, that of the great professional artist who
combines, in a union as fragile as it is improbable, a sense of
transgression and freedom from conformity with the rigour of an
extremely strict discipline of living and work, which presupposes
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bourgeois ease and celibacy and which is more characteristic of the
scientist or scholar (Bourdieu 1996: 111).

The bohemian, or the construct of the artist as outside of society, led the way for art to move away from bourgeois pretences and into new forms of aesthetic, ones that existed in reaction to conservativism and which were celebratory of transgression. But as both Becker and Bourdieu allude to, bohemianism, or the artist as removed from society, was largely a mythical construction. So how did this image of the lone and passionate individual come to represent artists?

The association of bohemians with artists began in the 1830’s where, with the end of the Napoleonic wars, young educated bourgeois men, who had no way of achieving the glory given to their fathers, moved to the cities in search of employment. However, due to the prevailing social norms, new positions were reasonably difficult to find, resulting in a glut of educated and reasonably wealthy males in Paris, all of whom were still under the influence of the romanticised and valorous ‘heroic’ character of the times. The effect of this was to generate an initially wealthy and idle population in central Paris, who, by way of passing time developed cultures of gossip, parties and elaborate dress codes, and rather than excelling at war, made their own ‘campaigns’ and excelled in decadent lifestyle (Richardson 1969: 26). By the 1890’s the bohemian lifestyle had taken over the key cultural institutions of Paris, generating what Shattuck called “The Banquet Years”, or a social milieu where parties, cafés, cabarets and banquets for the rich
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and the creative individuals that serviced them was de rigueur (Shattuck 1969). So
through boredom and wealth, an eccentric and hedonistic lifestyle was formed,
which, due to a small number of artists and writers being involved, as well as the
romantic notions inherent in being ‘the outcast’, came to be associated with art.

There was little real association between the bohemian and artistic creativity.
Rather, this social personality type signified one who lives at the fringes of
society and was, at least partly, resistant to traditional orders. What seems to be
the case is that a specific lifestyle, that of a decadent and possibly eccentric
individual, came to be associated with ‘the artist’ and therefore that of the
privileged creator in society. Elisabeth Wilson supports this point by showing
how, as opposed to being artistically gifted, bohemians were those that were
‘different’ and those that were involved in a very distinct set of institutionalised
behaviours.

Instead of the bohemian being an artist, they became those who sat at
the fringes. Representative figures of a society unable to set clear
limits for the identities and activities of its members. A figure to
explore marginal states of being and consciousness (Wilson 2000: 22)

To participate in café life was, however, more than a matter of
alleviating loneliness, for it was by participating in the social
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in institution of café life that the lonely artist became a bohemian (Wilson 2000: 34).

Bohemianism then is in one way attached to art, in that it has become a set of institutions that represent how an artist should appear, but in another way it has become more like a simulacrum of the artist; the perfect representation that does not actually exist (Baudrilliard 1983: 23). As Wilson says, bohemia was “always yesterday” (Wilson 2000: 10), it was the “search for the Holy Grail” (Wilson 2000: 11), and as such “the bohemian identity is impossible due to it being based on utopia” (Wilson 2000: 248). It seems then, that this notion of the aloof and decadent artist is a product of a similar nostalgia and romanticism that generates the concept of gemeinschaft; developing a vision of perfection that cannot be achieved but which simultaneously has great affect. The emphasis that individuals put upon creativity and the ways in which they polarised social structure and re-imagined bohemian society as inherently ‘better’ than mainstream lifestyles, is evidence of this romantic oversimplification of bohemian community.

A anthropological assessment of the bohemian lifestyle occurs in David Moore’s work on Perth rave culture (1995). In this text this lifestyle is expressed as “the bohemian pathway” and is used to define an overarching structure that describes the outwardly heterogenous and plural nature of the community. The ‘pathway’ describes a process, a set of philosophical beliefs as well as a moral and symbolic order, that attempts to define itself as outside, and essentially opposite, to that of
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the ‘straight’ world. Some of the defining features are youth, heterogeneity, and openness to ‘alternative’ lifestyles, shared housing and of course the shared use of space of the rave. Moore also uses the bohemian moniker to avoid having to label singular subcultures, applying it to the consistent themes across ‘grunge’ and gay, as well as dance cultures. These overarching themes compromise of shunning ‘nine-to-five’ jobs, a desire for new experiences and a belief that the views of ‘straight’ society are based on fear and ignorance. So there is a pattern, regardless of subculture, that leads individuals down the path of opposition to the mundane and into systems of alternate cultural hierarchies. It is this that today we can call bohemianism. The bohemian then is a symbolic and idealised construct that stands in opposition to ‘mainstream’ values. It essentially celebrates the romantic while denigrating the utilitarian, and by adhering to the tenets of this construct, individuals can align themselves as ‘against’ society whilst simultaneously joining a community of like minded (and freely elected) outcasts. But if there is a symbolic opposition to what is ‘normal’, then there must also be a symbolic ‘normal’ to oppose, and this comes in the form of ‘the mainstream’.

The oppositional and essentially mythic nature of the term ‘mainstream’ was dealt with rigorously by Sarah Thornton, who, after much fieldwork, noted that though the concept was constantly used by her subcultural informants, she could not find evidence of the group it referred to actually existing.
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The mainstream was a perennial point of discursive reference, perpetually absent from view … In the course of these four years’ ethnographic research, I was unable to find a crowd I could identify as typical, average, ordinary, majority or mainstream (1995: 106).

As such ‘mainstream’ becomes a way of defining an imagined other and therefore a device to aid in group solidarity. It is part of the ‘oppositional schema’ utilised in the maintenance of in and out groups to define who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’. Below is Thornton’s classification of oppositional terms that shows quite clearly the polarised nature of cultural themes in youth culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>US</strong></th>
<th><strong>THEM</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip / cool</td>
<td>Straight / square / naff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic</td>
<td>False / phoney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebellious / radical</td>
<td>Conformist / conservative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist genres</td>
<td>Pop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insider knowledge</td>
<td>Easily accessible information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>Majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterogenous</td>
<td>Homogenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classless</td>
<td>Classed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Figure 24: Thornton's ‘them’ and ‘us’ schema (1995: 115)

What this table shows is a clear illustration of how, regardless of subculture, urban youth involved in any subcultural activity come to define themselves as not mainstream. It seems then that the basis of much of the identity politics and categorisations of both ‘us’ and ‘them’ occurring within subcultural communities is not necessarily based on any ‘truth’, per se, and is to a large extent constructed in order to maintain cohesion and distinction from an imagined other. Rutherford supports this by showing how groups use this “binarism” to not only mark the limits of the community, but to posit that which is anathema to the community onto those outside of the community (1990: 23). In terms of the Perth and Fremantle communities, this construction of community members as artistic and those outside of it as uncreative would then be maintained not out of any actual creativity, but rather to delineate the boundaries of these communities and to suggest that those outside of its boundaries are of lesser value due to their non-creativity.

It seems then that the bohemian lifestyle is not necessarily centred on art and creativity but more on deliberate distinction. It is constructed as a way to segregate individuals into different cultural codes and is inherently linked to romantic notions of the poor, but passionate, artist. As such it shows the same nostalgic and mythic basis as gemeinschaft, and must therefore be considered with the same critical gaze. But regardless of its idealistic and essentially
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manufactured nature, the image of the ‘passionate individual’ was central to how the researched community members constructed their identities. And it was through utilising this rhetoric that individuals came to position themselves as above those outside of the community.

The passionate hero and the lumpen suburbanite

Regarding the imagined state of community, Anderson points out that rather than examining the truth or falsity of specific communities, we should assume that all communities are constructed and instead focus on how they came to be (1983: 6). One of the central themes in how these communities came to be, aside from superficiality, shared space and common culture covered in earlier chapters, is the presumption that all community members were passionate.

For both the Perth and Fremantle communities, one of the distinguishing features of group membership was, what people called “individual passion”. Where, regardless of career path, individuals had to be able to represent their life choices as passionate ones; essentially mimicking the bohemian, but in relation to everyday life as opposed to artistic endeavour. This occurred whether individuals were unemployed or not and whether they were involved with traditionally creative fields or professional ones. It also occurred in terms of social situations, where the dispassionate were deemed to be less interesting and not spoken to as much. To an extent the practicalities, such as actual career, were irrelevant, what was significant was the image that the individual presented, or their belief in their own creativity; as can be seen below.
Mike: I like the demographic of people here. I know that they are going to be into the same kind of things I’m going to be into, so I don’t have to go to a social gathering and put up with aimless pointless conversation. You know, totally impassionate stuff. That really annoys me. I hate conversation for conversations sake.

Steve: Isn’t it a bit superficial though? I mean people talk to me more as a sociologist than they did as a computer programmer. Isn’t it all just romanticising the more interesting, poorer person?

Mike: No, it’s ‘cos you’re more passionate about what you’re doing now, and that comes across. Now you have something real to say, not just talking about your job, or just working for the hell of it. If you weren’t into it we wouldn’t have talked to you …

Steve: I’ve noticed a lot of art students about.

Mike: Oh yeah, predominantly, or at least art student types. But it’s not that important as far as social stuff goes. It’s more about the passion. If you’re passionate about it it’s ok, and as long as it’s not the norm. Once you do something and don’t just go home and watch TV. Sometimes it’s hard to keep going without money, but if you’ve got the passion it
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takes a back seat to everything else. Paying the rent takes the back burner.

Steve: What? Everyone here is passionate about their life’s work?

Mike: I’ve got friends who are law students, but their reason is to help people, not just wanting to get rich. But I do nothing, and people love that, as long as you can articulate it in a way that makes it sound kind of noble, or at least quirky. I work one day a week, but cos I expresses happiness about that I’m not a dero [derelict]. I’m a poet and a writer and I’m sort of romantic.

This quote is emblematic of the focus that is placed on passion, individuality and deviation from the norm that runs through many everyday community themes. Beginning with the types of conversations Mike has and covering issues such as career, television watching and representation, he shows how significant it is to be seen to be extraordinary, or at the very least distinct from the masses. So regardless of which path an individual takes, it must be ‘passionate’, and irrespective of what aspect of life is being examined (socialising, work, unemployment, study or actively constructing one’s persona into a romanticised vision of the bohemian poet) one must strive to appear creative and non-mundane.

In many ways this emphasis on passion is similar to Hetherington’s ‘romantic structure of feeling’, or communities based on notions of self-development,
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authenticity and romanticism. Popular examples would be the original hippies of Camden and San Francisco, the beat poets and artists of Greenwich village and the new age travellers in the UK. These communities were resistant to conservative and utilitarian worldviews, holding a preference for the idealistic aspects of life over the mundane, or as Hetherington says:

[a] structure of feeling that is organised around ideas of experience, authenticity and identity that derive from the idea of participating in the changing of the self through engaging with others, in forms of resistance to the symbols of inauthenticity and instrumentalism (1998: 78).

Here ‘structure of feeling’ relates Raymond Williams’ concept whereby individuals are united through their common emotion of how it feels to live in a time and place (1977: 132) and in Hetherington’s case the common emotion is romance. But by romance he is not alluding to unrealistic or naïve worldviews, rather it is an attempt to describe the poetic, highly individual, struggle of classical romanticism. There is then a heroic element to this, where individualism, persistence and passion are applauded while drudgery and acceptance of society’s norms are not.

Featherstone refers to this as “the heroic life” and suggests that it is a social trend whereby individuals attempt to separate themselves from the mundane by
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representing themselves as giving away the careful calculation of the working world. By doing this they give the appearance of living a non-systematic, adventurous life, or of actually living instead of simply existing (Featherstone 1995: 59)

Outwardly this gives the illusion of abandonment and heightened danger, but by focusing on the heroic, the individual is limiting the set of possibilities they can subscribe to. By not focusing on the working life they are preventing themselves from achieving the goals of the rest of society, which both generates distinction and simultaneously makes their lives simpler, as the number of possibilities decline. But it is also making life simpler by generating a singular goal or by removing the pluralities of contemporary life to generate a united individual, essentially re-centring the individual onto one theme. The heroic life then is a retreat to a simpler position, where the ranges of possibilities that can be achieved are reduced and a single non-shifting persona is generated. In this way it gives a ‘unity’ to the individuals’ understanding of their identity (Featherstone 1995: 60), as well as giving them the singular drive to be distinct from the masses. Artists and musicians (the contemporary heroes) are sustained by this ‘hero ethic’ as they remove themselves from the world and attempt to gain distinction from the masses, and in doing so, regardless of their ability to actually generate art, go about making their lives into works of art (Featherstone 1995: 63-64).
To a large degree this desire to make identity into an artwork is driven by the pre-eminence of authenticity as a status symbol and as representative of that which is desirable in contemporary society. As Lash and Lury put it:

> Historically, authenticity has been one of the most important values realized in the movement of goods. Indeed, Appadurai (1986) argues that the mass production of goods has seen a shift in the regime of values associated with many kinds of exchange. This shift from a regime structured in terms of *exclusivity*, where the value of goods was regulated by the costs of acquisition, to one that is structured by *authenticity* (2007: 141).

There has been a shift then from that which is cost exclusive to that which is authentic, and this, at least partly, explains the significance given to ‘authentic’ garments and affects covered in the previous chapter. But there are other aspects to it. David Grazien for example shows the significance of genuine subcultures, where individuals are shown to hunt for the most ‘authentic’ expression of blues culture, limiting their experience to ‘black only’ blues, as blues bands with white people in them are not ‘authentic’ enough (2004). Similarly, Norma Urquula shows the conflict inherent in flamenco dance culture, as individuals within the scene fight over whether new moves are ‘authentic’ enough to be labelled flamenco (2004).

There is then a great emphasis placed on how ‘real’ a community is, where individuals continually seek to legitimise their culture through seeking for its
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authentic elements, but there is also a personal side to this quest. Giddens shows us that it is not only authenticity of cultural product and belonging that has importance, but also that of the authentic individual:

the moral thread of self-actualisation is authenticity- but not just being true to the self, rather it is a detangling of the true self from the false self (Giddens 1991: 79).

There is then an overriding theme within contemporary society where we are attempting to separate our ‘authentic’ selves from that part of our persona caught up in the ‘false consciousness’ of society, and out of this to generate our ‘true’ selves. Authenticity then becomes about self-development and about being who we really are, but to be authentic and truly be ourselves we must remove ourselves from the everyday, inauthentic world.

From this we can see that there is a polarity between the romantic-heroic-authentic ideal and that of mundane everyday life. Where, if the romantic life focuses on “life, love, liberty, hope and joy” (Heelas 2008:27), as well as ‘authentic’ experience and self-development, then mundaneness must focus on its opposite, or lumpen, dreary, and essentially inauthentic lives. And if, as Hetherington says, “Identity is about similarity and difference” (1998: 15), implying that polarised symbols of identification and distinction are used as the basis of our identity formation, then we can see how this dichotomy can be
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utilised to make the individual distinct from others, which then becomes a vital part of their identity.

From the ethnography, such as Mike’s quote above, we can see that this has occurred. Individuals within these communities constructed those outside as living dispassionate, dull and essentially pointless lives, and by this logic saw themselves as the inverse, or of having highly passionate, heroic and ultimately more rewarding existences. Passion became a way of separating the community members from those outside and a way of making the everyday activities of community members seem heroic. It also served the function of validating many of the activities of the community, where, as with Elias and Scotson’s example, due to the logic of the community deeming that perspectives from outside the community were of lesser value, any critique was deemed invalid (Elias and Scotson 1994: xviii). What ‘passion’ generated then was a way to not only separate the insiders from the outsiders, but also a way to elevate those on the inside to a loftier position, essentially generating the self-righteousness mentioned above. And while self-righteousness is generally viewed as an inherently negative trait, in this instance it was quite productive. In the open celebration of their arrogance, and their assumed communal understanding of cultural superiority, many myths of community were maintained, which enabled a common communal belief system to emerge.
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Essentially what the focus on passion allowed was an alternate ordering of what was socially significant. It generated a cultural hierarchy that was seen by community members to be outside of ‘mainstream’ activities. As mentioned, it was largely imagined and constructed to aid in functions of segregation, cohesion and elevation, but it was simultaneously a social fact in that it was largely accepted as truth. A physical effect of this alternate ordering was the way in which it affected working and socializing habits, both of which went some way to reinforce distinction and notions of superiority.

Work, hedonism, social norms and alternative geography

The significance of paid work lies not only in its ability to raise income but also in its capacity to generate social identity (Edgell 2006: 106-107). So strong is this notion that the changing nature of the work environment has been the starting point for many discussions on the changing nature of identity and social structure as a whole (Watson, Buchanan et al. 2003). And while the significance of work to the research population was noted, it was essentially opposite to what one would expect.

As per the above section on passion, work was seen, not to be a marker of identity, but as a marker of distinction. Work was something that other people did and that those outside of the community focused on. In opposition to their construction of external working practices, community members defined themselves by what they did outside of work and generally dismissed work as pointless, unless it was associated with creativity. As such, work was
Self-righteousness distinction and community

symbolically associated with the dispassionate and the mundane, as the extract below shows.

Steve: Does anyone know people that don’t make anything?
James: Yeah, everyone where I work doesn’t create anything.

They’re not destined for greatness, its sad, but it makes me more inspired to do something.
Mike: I’m going for a job at a catering company, you can work when you want, 7 days or one day. I’m in the one-day category.
James: I’m working heaps.
Tony: That’s why you don’t have any friends.
Mike: I have a long-standing relationship with the dole. The Midland office is the best.
All: Laugh – conversation degenerates into multiple discussions of dole offices and personal dole office stories.

So work is seen as pointless as it takes time away from creativity and socialisation. It signifies the opposite of “greatness” and as such it is not part of the ‘heroic life’, essentially becoming the opposite of the community belief system. However, many of the research population did work, but how this was rationalised within the value system involved, once again, the bohemian/artist construct.
Self-righteousness distinction and community

As with Richard Lloyd’s work (2006: 181), what occurred in this research group was that individuals fell into positions that were deemed as legitimate artist positions, such as café workers and bar staff. Typically these positions were either part-time or at irregular working hours and had the effect of polarising the hours that community members and non-community members socialised. The “tourist” pattern, or the typical ‘mainstream’ socialising time was representative of peak entertainment times, such as Friday/Saturday night and Sunday day. With the service positions and casual hours that the majority of respondents held, they were more free to socialise during the week and until quite late at night, resulting in different time and space usage within the city. This resulted in what Chatterton and Hollands called ‘fringe’ entertainment practices; essentially that which took place on the outskirts of mainstream activity and utilised ‘alternative’ consumption habits (2002; 2003: 89). And, as with Massey’s work on the ways in which different activities create different understandings of locale (1993: 65), the effect of this was to create alternative geographies of both areas.

It was partly through these alternative geographies, consumption habits and understandings of the locale that individuals defined both who they were and who they are not. Bennett showed this to be the case in Northern England, where the rave culture of Newcastle defined itself against the movements and consumption habits of the pub dwelling drinking culture (Bennett 2000: 87). In the same way, the majority of respondents showed preference for entertainment practices and the
Self-righteousness distinction and community

utilisation of spaces that were not considered part of tourist, or mainstream behaviour.

In terms of space use, neither the Fremantle nor the Perth group used central entertainment venues at ‘typical’ times, such as on weekends. If commercial sites were used, it was during the week and typically during the day, but was generally any time that people from out-of-town were not around. On weekends alternate space was created, such as house parties, or privately organised events in spaces not normally associated with mass socialising.

These were generally outside of centralised nightlife spots or in areas that would attract the general public or ‘walk in’ trade, such as the out of the way galleries in Perth, or warehouses just outside the entertainment area. This type of activity was heavily associated with notions of authenticity, where, rather than evenings being organised for profit, they were organised for ‘fans’ of the music or individuals within the community, and as such were deemed to be of a higher calibre.

One effect of this was to create a ‘knowledge economy’, where to gain access to these sites, individuals had to know about them in advance, which maintained the distinction between ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ groups based on, in Thornton’s terms, “subcultural capital” (1995: 98). It also maintained the integrity of both communities, as to continue to go to events, one had to be able to find them, which meant having to go to more events. This cycle of participation/knowledge
Self-righteousness distinction and community

proved to be significant in the development of networks of trust and continued participation, but it also showed the huge significance of socialising to these communities.

The hedonistic nature of both of these communities is evident in the ethnographic chapters five and six. Their opinion regarding work, the limited hours they worked, and the non-routine employment patterns, all allowed for larger amounts of socialising than those in more traditional, ‘nine-to-five’ jobs. So structurally the way in which this lifestyle operated allowed for greater socialising. But the key points were that this lifestyle was elected, allowing for more individual freedom, that it was continually reinforced as ‘the good life’ and it stood in opposition to normal, mundane, life.

The valorisation of hedonism became symbolically significant as the antithesis of work, and thus became another marker of distinction between the masses and the ‘free living’ urban communities.

Hariot (shop attendant in William street): It’s a really debauched lifestyle; we go out heaps and there’s always stuff on. And everyone’s dropping out of uni and stuff. I think people just don’t want to commit to anything. I mean I can have a crappy little job like this one and have a good lifestyle. I don’t need to do any more
Self-righteousness distinction and community

than this. I’ve got heaps of friends and lots to do. I don’t need to
work full time, I wouldn’t want to.

Work was secondary to entertainment, and is essentially there to support a vibrant social life. As such its dominance as a defining feature of an individual’s personality, or its significance to these individuals as an identity construct, was negligible. What were far more significant were the events, street-cultures, social nexus, cliques and trends that these individuals utilised, which, when taken as the opposite of the significant objects of dominant culture (arguably work, property and financial well-being) became part of the duality between these individuals and their constructed other.

So rather than work being significant as a form of social identity, it became something to oppose. Identity was found in the opposite of work, namely socialising and cultural elitism. This has been noted by others, who have documented the productive and identity forming nature of ‘fringe’ entertainment practices over that of mainstream practices (Chatterton and Hollands 2003: 89). In forgoing wealth they have constructed an alternate hierarchy that is not based on economic success but social and cultural achievement, and it is within this schema that they generate their identities and their notions of communitas. As Bourdieu says:
Self-righteousness distinction and community

All of this is no less true of its most destitute members who, strong in cultural capital and the authority born as being *taste-makers*, succeed in providing themselves at the least cost with audacities of dress, culinary fantasies, mercenary loves and refined leisure, for all of which the ‘bourgeois’ pay dearly (1996: 57)

Arrogance, others and community

In general, almost everything that could be construed as ‘mainstream’ became a form of opposition and therefore a foil against which the community could be formed. Even locality was scorned, with “Perth sucks” and “Perth is a social void” becoming regular refrains from many of the respondents. In fact, in one way or another all respondents at some stage suggested that the local art, music, social life, suburbs, city or general mentality of people living in Western Australia was substandard. This led to the conclusion that, generally, individuals involved with these communities dislike *everything* associated with whatever they were not, or whatever they have defined themselves against.

Once again the significance of creating a distinction between one’s community and an, essentially constructed, ‘other’ can be seen. But this ‘othering’ is not simply a mechanism to generate difference, it is also a tool to elevate those within the community to a higher position than others, even if this only occurred in the minds of those within the community. Practically, this was observed through the ways in which individuals continually positioned themselves as *above* those that they considered to be ‘mainstream’, or who Elinore (from Fremantle) referred to
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as “the sheep”. When asked to generalise about his community, Mike (from Mount Lawley) said that:

It’s an interest in the same things, but also a rejection of the mainstream. Everyone would hate the same things, the same crap music, commercial TV, the norm of nine to five … The rest of society blindly gives in to an ideology that has been mapped out for them, like marriage, career and stuff. So, yeah, there’s a rejection of standard ideals.

So rather than having a positively constructed perspective of his community, it appears that it is negatively constructed in opposition to how he imagines the ‘rest’ of society. Furthermore, the fact that the group he associates with not only rejects society’s norms, but go on to generate their own, means that, to themselves, they do not ‘blindly’ follow the dictates of others; a fact that adheres to the dogma of individualism and authenticity necessitated by bohemian rhetoric, and which also maintains the bohemian ethic as dominant over that of ‘mainstream’. By developing their own ‘pathway’, individuals within this group can claim superiority over those that follow the dictates of the rest of society, as this is one of the reified myths of the community. The rejection of norms, and the superiority this achieves, is, once again, reiterated by Mike below:
Self-righteousness distinction and community

That thing of rejecting the things in mainstream culture and your parent’s culture. That’s how they [his friends] would like to see themselves anyway. Actually, they probably have a fairly conceited opinion of themselves, but they don’t like to say that. But in Subi [Subiaco: an exclusive inner-city suburb] they all buy expensive crap that is essentially pointless. They probably see us as wannabe cool, kind of losers really. Like, we always talk about the abuse that we get from these people. They drive past, and we have long hair, so we all get called faggots (laughs). It’s standard abuse, its water off a ducks back. But if a metro [metrosexual/consumerist] guy walks down the street, we don’t call him meathead or anything. So in that we’re kind of superior.

In this instance it was not the individual pathway that Mike gained an elevated sense of himself from, but an ethical superiority in that he did not partake in vacuous consumption as well as a moral superiority that he did not openly insult other groups. We also see the ambivalence with which superiority is treated, as on one hand Mike suggested that feelings of superiority were bad, but also that, based on the feelings of superiority that others felt towards him, this actually made him and his community superior.

Another vector of superiority was the distinction between the urban and the suburban. Where the suburbs were seen to be the home of everything ‘wrong’.
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People from the suburbs were seen to have no culture, no dress sense, no fun and no community; they worked too hard and lived by the rules of others. All of the comments below are from different interviews:

Beth: We have parties, people in the suburbs can’t be bothered.

Zeeb: My folks sit in their house in a sprung up suburb, behind a gated garage. There’s no noise, there’s no birds, no laughter, no music. To live in a suburb and not know your neighbours is not community.

Elinore: Perth was so suburban, everyone washing their cars and I started to get picked on and I was quite depressed.

Phil: People move out but nothing really happens in the suburbs.

Tom: Suburbanites - people getting lost, hanging out in little groups and by themselves and becoming individualistic.

Mary: I went to a barbeque in the burbs recently. It’s weird in out there. The food is odd. The décor is odd. It’s like I’m on mescaline. They’ve got doyleys and fake cats that miaou. I’m not one to judge, but it’s terrible.

What is evident in the above however, is not so much the geographical distinction that is significant, but the way in which “suburban” is used to signify otherness and inferiority. The fact that most of the interviewees initially came from suburbs was never mentioned by them, neither was the fact that the stereotypes cast upon
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suburbanites is, at best, flawed; as shown, for example, by the creativity of the suburbs of Sydney (Gibson 2006). But the issue here is that regardless of the ‘truth’ or of the actual lived reality of others, the logic of community continues to construct reasons why the individuals within it are better than those outside of it. This is done not simply for the distinction that this creates but for the sense of superiority that it engenders. There is then an arrogance that goes along with distinction, where individuals must value the distinction they have made, and to an extent be proud of it, for it to have any real effect. And while there are definite ‘lines’ of distinction, such as the urban-suburban divide or the worker–artist dichotomy, the real distinction lies in whatever the ‘myths’ of inclusion and exclusion dictate.

Though the arrogance of respondents has been hinted at, particularly in the Fremantle ethnography, it is more clearly noted when viewed from outside of the community. Both John and Jeremy were on the fringe of the Perth community. They were close enough to observe the practices of individuals in the group, but did not get involved, and to an extent show the same ‘othering’ that community members actively used to generate the boundaries of their community.

Jeremy: I can’t tell whether it’s cool, or just to do with being different. But they’re really cliquey and don’t speak to anyone who’s not one of them. They say they are really
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open to stuff, but if you don’t know them or what they’re talking about, then they don’t want to know you.

John: I’m not in marketing so I don’t go to The Brisbane or to The Queens [two non-alternative venues in Mount Lawley]
When I go out, I go to The Scotsman [the student pub in Mount Lawley], but I’m not that arty either. If you’re outside that sort of thing, or you don’t like art then you don’t hang out with them. The arty crowd have a sense of being superior ’cos they know lots about art. Art is overrated to me. It’s good, it’s fun to do, and I’ve done a bit myself, but people elevate it to something else, like a class or something. I’m sure they wouldn’t see it in this way though. To them it’s all about self-expression, expressing their inner self, which I think is just a load of crap. The alternative crowd want to be popular and to appear arty, constantly thinking about expressing themselves through this arty thing, they think they are better than everyone ‘cos of their knowledge, but they’re the same as the professionals, its just a different façade. It’s very superficial.
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These extracts clearly show how the researched communities appear from the outside. The internal logic of the community suggests that they value difference and individualism, but from outside it appears as close-minded self-absorption.

So rather than being welcoming and open to all, these communities were quite active in how they repelled those from outside. Lloyd noted a similar phenomenon in the cafés of Wicker Park, where, far from being the egalitarian and socially levelling places as talked about in romantic bohemian literature (Gluck 2005), or the places where the barriers of community fell away (Oldenburg 1989), they were more accurately “a stage where subcultural distinctions were performed via the snubbing of outsiders” (Lloyd 2006: 109). And herein lies the irony of bohemian cliques, on the one hand they constitute themselves as open and diverse populations that are welcoming of all-comers, on the other they are quite closed to outsiders, demonstrating what Lloyd calls the ‘bohemian paradox’, where “elitism is performed through the snubbing of presumptive elites” (2006: 109). So by manufacturing the other as elitist, or as inherently ‘bad’ they are in turn allowed to be elitist, but all the while maintaining the moral upper hand by validating their activities through the pretence of egalitarian dogma.

To once again refer to Elias and Scotson, the exclusionist comments above are remarkably similar to their outsiders’ remarks; “They’re snobby and snotty”, “They don’t care for us and they never have”, “Too smug, they’ve never tried to understand us” and “too damned stuck-up” (1994: 80). These remarks show the
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frustration that those outside of the community felt, as they were excluded and made to suffer the inferiority of being considered lowly. But as the authors continually point out, had ‘the established’ not celebrated their superiority, or not had pride in their distinction from others they would not have generated such a cohesive community (Mennell 1989: 119).

Similar observations have been made about other communities. Where, had the Irish, Scottish and French not celebrated their, largely constructed, distinction from others, they would not have generated the national culture and identities that they did (Hanafin 2001) (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1993; Trevor-Roper 1993) (Anderson 1983). Similarly had diasporic communities not generated a cohesive culture and then shown pride in the face of dismissive dominant cultures, they would not have evolved into the coherent cultural identities they are today (McCaffrey 1976; Harles 1993; Lowe 2003; Radhakrishnan 2003). In fact, much post-colonial, nationalist and cultural literature on identity, demonstrates that it is not so much the difference between groups that is significant (Rutherford 1990; Reynolds 1994; Hall 2000), but the celebration of these differences. Whether it be the “daily plebiscite” (Kedourie 1994: 54; Miller 1995: 24), the “brazen celebration of populist views” (Gellner 1993: 65) or the “whole body of effort made by a people in a sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Fanon 1967: 188), the core of community activity requires that it be continually celebrated. And given that the internal meaning of the community derives from
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that which others are not, what these communities are celebrating is not being someone else.

The same applied to the Perth-Fremantle study groups. Without the distinction between ‘mainstream’ activities, and the superiority they felt due to this, there would have been very little difference between them and the rest of society. And without the celebration of their way of life there would have been very little uniting the members of these communities. Where this celebration of community differed from the above, however, was in its lack of negative effect. Unlike the Elias example, there was little in the way of degradation that resulted from this distinction. Neither were there the types of tensions associated with nationalist, ethnic or cultural distinction. Though Jeremy and John expressed an aversion to the activities of the researched communities, their social realities were not negatively affected by being marked as outside of these communities. Instead it merely showed them to be part of other urban communities, ones that drew their categories of distinction and superiority from, in part, not being associated with the researched groups. And this adheres with the multi subcultural perspective of urban communities. Exclusion from one community does not mean exclusion from all, in fact the exclusion of some individuals may actually be part of the internal logic that unites and solidifies other urban communities.

So, deliberate distinction and the celebration of difference defined the limits of the communities, and so strong were these feelings that community members started
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to see themselves as better than those outside the study groups. However, rather
than this being ‘bad’ it was actually a normative function of community, allowing
for the superiority necessary for community boundaries to come into existence.
While arrogance and superiority would typically be considered as detrimental
social traits, in this case they were actually central to community and were very
significant devices in the celebration of similarity and maintaining community
boundaries through differentiation.

**Conclusion**
The ‘unity’ in community refers to a singular attribute that unites and makes a
single ‘unit’ out of the many. Though there were a number of these unifying
practices found across both communities, such as a focus on hedonistic lifestyles,
passionate individualism and a disdain of traditional careers, the key similarity
was an imagined closeness to those adjacent to them and a dislike of those at a
distance. Here distance was not measured exclusively geographically. Though
there were numerous references to ‘the suburbs’ as the antithesis of urbanity, the
main difference was that of cultural distinction, or a manufactured division
between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

As an analogy ‘the bohemian’ served as an adequate, but still overly generalised,
descriptor for the division between these individuals and the rest of society. The
iconic figure of the artist, passionately struggling against a mundane existence for
the sake of their art, became the central identity template for the individuals in
these communities. And the heroic, romantic, hedonistic and individualistic
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tendencies of this ‘social character’ have, to a great degree, been taken up by community members to produce a collective of self-imagined creative outcasts. However, though a great many professed to being creative, it was evident that actual cultural output was not necessary; what was more important was the separation of the self from those who were perceived to be not creative and those not interested in being creative.

It is here that the concept of the ‘mainstream’ became significant, where in order to create a cohesive image of both identity and community, individuals manufactured an ‘other’, one that stood in opposition to them and in doing so allowed them to more clearly define themselves. In this instance ‘mainstream’ consisted of a number of attributes, but was usually defined by majority consensus, or the chief demographic of the locale. In this case it referred to stable careers, financial security, home ownership, commitment to family and work, and the reduced sociality and passion (or creativity) that flow from having such a routinised existence. As per Thornton’s work, the validity of this construct is questionable, as it was based on an averaging of many unknowns. But regardless of its actual existence, the ‘mainstream’ was believed in by community members, and became instrumental in developing the in-group.

With the reification of the mainstream came a reification of opposition to it. Where, as the construct of a ‘parent culture’ emerged so the bohemian/artistic/alternative subculture built up a distinct symbolic set of
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practices that stood in opposition to those of the mainstream. These practices
centred on that which was not mainstream, such as gregarious sociality and less of
a focus placed on employment and family. This also led to an alternate ordering of
time and space, where, as individuals took up casual and service labour patterns
they gave priority to nocturnal activities in ‘atypical’ surroundings. As a result of
this, and other organisational aspects of the communities, alternate orderings and
hierarchies emerged. Rather than being centred on the (generally imagined)
consumption habits of the mainstream, they were much more focused on social
networking, cultural elitism and notions of authentic personal development. The
result was a set of preferences and cultural similarities that were consistent in both
communities and which look remarkably similar to Thornton’s illustration of
oppositional, or ‘us’ and ‘them’, youth cultures. The objects and social
phenomena that were held in high regard were very much the mirror image or
reverse of the constructed mainstream and as such stood out as a distinct cultural
schema.

What we can say then is that the tenets of this set of cultural norms go to define, at
least symbolically, the limits of the community. In accepting this schema
individuals come to voice the rhetoric of the community, which on the one hand
provides reasons why group members have a common bond, but on the other
provides reasons why those outside the group should be denigrated. It seems then
that it is part of community rhetoric to not only celebrate similarity, but also to
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deride those outside of the community, or at the very least to generate cultural
superiority of insiders over outsiders.

The rules of community are mythic. They are manufactured ‘truths’ of inclusion
and exclusion, superiority and inferiority, health and sickness, that have, through
their acceptance and constant reiteration, become true to those who use them. And
this is no different from the most overly utilised theorising of community, that of
gemeinschaft. Gemeinschaft is intrinsically based on notions of inclusion,
romance and the attempted realisation of a utopian vision. It appears then, that
generally, notions of community are simple, overarching and essentially
manufactured, and from this perspective the above communities are no different
from more classical conceptions of traditional community. They are utilising a
dichotomous relation to define themselves and using an overly romantic vision of
the artist as their identity template.

By generating a difference between themselves and the rest of society, and then
celebrating this distinction through engaging in creative and hedonistic behaviour,
these individuals have generated the cultural foundations for a community. By
celebrating what they are, and simultaneously what others are not, they are both
reinforcing symbolic distinction, thus maintaining community boarders, and
elevating those inside the community to a higher level than those on the outside,
making those on the inside feel ‘special’. Though these myths of superiority are
manufactured, they have the effect of generating an arrogance within the
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community, whereby they ‘know’ they are inherently better than others. And while to outsiders this may appear unsolicited, unwarranted and conceited, it is actually necessary for the group to exist. Arrogance and self-righteousness then, operate as a legitimising device that illustrates why those within the group have elevated status and those outside have none, and without which the cultural hierarchies in operation within the communities would not function.
Chapter 10: Conclusion

A number of propositions flow from this thesis, the most general being an alternate conception of how community should be considered. Rather than seeing community as homogenous, emotionally supportive and inclusive, the thesis has shown how it can actually be fractured, diverse, exclusive and shallow, while still providing individuals with a definite sense of community attachment and belonging. Evidence from the fieldwork suggests that there was a more specific focus on phenomena typically associated with the socially ‘unhealthy’, such as superficiality, arrogance and individualism. However, as opposed to many contemporary theorists who suggest that these forms of sociality are indicative of the demise of ‘true’ community, this thesis illustrated how these practises are actually quite productive in the development and maintenance of community bonds. The main proposition then was to argue against simplistic, and essentially naïve, perspectives of community, and to show how social norms, which are generally not associated with communal living, generate very effective forms of interaction and social structure.

By way of introduction, the concept of gemeinschaft was examined. This concept is emblematic of mythical traditional, rural social relations. Implicit with gemeinschaft are notions of health, wellbeing, non-contractual reciprocal arrangements between members and essentially a warm and caring social environment. Its counterpoint, gesellschaft, is often deemed to be purely contractual, isolating and inharmonious with its surroundings, generating a subject
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who is unsupported, alienated from their surroundings and essentially on their own in an uncaring social landscape.

The distinction between the two is linked to the significance of ‘tradition’ within the systems. In the case of gemeinschaft, social ties are presumed to be between family members and long term friends. They are also presupposed to exist in reasonably isolated geographies and to incorporate all members of the community in a singular culture. Gesellschaft on the other hand places lesser significance on these forms of social relation, assuming that in an urban environment social ties will be weaker, as they are short term and across a wider range of people, generating a social milieu where no single tradition will maintain dominance.

In his analysis of literature that focused on the rural idyll, Raymond Williams suggested that the distinction between the “country and the city” was not so much a reality as a poetic fiction, one that has been part of popular literature since the beginning of records. From The Garden of Eden, through Paradise Lost to the romantic representations of his father’s lifetime, Williams showed how nostalgic interpretations of times-gone-by constructed the past as a golden age, and, by comparison, the present into a nightmare. Similarly, gemeinschaft has, through valorising simple over more complex social structures, gone about constructing an ideal out of rural traditional community, one that has essentially negated the possibility of any good coming from urban, non-traditional, communities. It was
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from the perspective of being highly critical of nostalgic interpretations of the past that the thesis examined some contemporary perspectives regarding community.

What was revealed was that many contemporary perspectives on the nature of contemporary life, notably Putnam’s demise of community argument (2000), Bauman’s Liquid society argument (Bauman 2000), Beck’s individualization argument (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), plus a host of other dystopian perspectives, were largely based on quite romantic notions of the past. And while they make for convincing arguments, they were far too quick to signal the demise of ‘community’. These authors have been using their theoretical perspectives to show how ‘real’ community no longer exists. The extension of their argument is that we, as a society, are less healthy for it. However, what these authors appear to be doing is reifying gemeinschaft as a reality and then mourning its passing, regardless of its romanticised heritage. And the effect of this has been to negate any form of community that does not look like, or come up to the standards of gemeinschaft, essentially doing away with the possibility of urban community as anything more than an inadequate imitation of ‘real’ community.

From this standpoint the validity or reliability of studies of community becomes questionable, as any activity that does not fit into typical (gemeinschaft) community behaviour appears less than ideal, or at least questionable. It is this perspective that chapter four attempted to challenge, by showing how, far from communities being the ‘warm’ and ‘cosy’ places of the rural idyll, they are more
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typically fractured, individualised, labelled as communities by others and regularly involve conflict and exclusion as part of their construction and maintenance.

Following this were two ethnographic chapters, which provided examples of non-typical, or rather, non-gemeinschaft, communities in action. They were non-typical in that they were incomplete, transient, superficial, and outwardly uncaring social networks, and as such could not match up to the ideal of community as defined by gemeinschaft. However, they did show key traits of community behaviour, such as gossip, in-group and out-group construction, reasonably common cultural norms, and a knowledge of other individuals across the community networks. So while on one hand they were not emblematic of archetypical community, on other they were very real examples of communities in action.

The first of the analysis chapters, on social structure and superficiality, showed how, rather than there being a single community operating in either locality, what was more evident were large numbers of different subcultures and personal networks, many of which interconnected to form the greater community. The communities being studied had no absolute beginning or end, instead their members tapered off into other communities and social networks. The reason for showing this was to illustrate how the very concept of community in an urban environment is problematic. Unlike the assumptions of gemeinschaft conceptions,
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the city does not have singular communities, and this can give the appearance of a lack of solidarity or social fracturing. However, this is actually the norm regarding city communities. Due to their plurality, diversity and state of fluidity urban communities are particularly difficult to apply discrete labels to, but regardless, they still exist, just not in the singular, easily identifiable, form.

The second half of this chapter showed how the use of key social and cultural institutions brought the many different local groups together and allowed them to become the loosely bounded community that they were. The public, private and semi-public spaces, such as shared houses, gigs, pubs and in particular house parties, were shown to provide the space where these individuals could create and sustain the cultural and social networks that generate community bonds. Equally significant however were the ways in which many of these individuals communicated.

Superficiality was shown to be of tremendous importance in the development of these community connections and network ties. Though the connections individuals made from utilising this form of interaction were relatively ‘weak’, the strength of this form of communication was evident in a number of ways. Firstly, it provided for fast, efficient interaction, which essentially allowed for the norms of the community to be transferred quickly across many ‘types’ of people. Secondly, it maintained social distance, and as such helped individuals perform their public selves without having to reveal details that would not be conducive to
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public interaction. In this way, it aided in the development of public space, or a space where individuals could interact socially, and for no other reason than socialising. This aided it the development of far-reaching and dense, but weakly tied, social networks, which largely defined much of the community. Thirdly, due to its lack of social richness, it maintained an openness that allowed for the many groups in the areas to become involved in conversation; essentially reducing the barriers to inter-group communication, allowing them to interact. And finally, though maintaining social distance and removing the necessity of commitment to anything more than the immediate conversation, it allowed for individuals to retain autonomy while engaging in communal activity. Such was the significance of superficial conversation to the development of these community networks that it is doubtful that the communities would have been as successful as they were without it.

This chapter finished with a review of the significance of gossip with regard to the transfer of community norms, the transfer of knowledge regarding individuals within the community and how individuals became community members. Gossip was shown to be interaction within the community its topic was the community; as such it maintained the focus on community activity from the perspective of the community members. It was also shown to be a key site for incorporating individuals into the community, where, in accepting the consensus of community members, individuals actually gave up part of their autonomy and joined the community.
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In sum, the aim of this chapter was firstly to show that the plural, fractured and highly individualised state of urban relations were not abnormal; they were typical of the social structure of cities and not an indicator of social decay. The second point was to illustrate the necessity of superficial interaction as a way to bridge the gaps between the many cultural groups operating in the city. As such, this chapter showed how outwardly fractured social environments, and the outwardly pointless conversations uniting them, were productive forces in the development of urban communities and not indicators of urban and social decay.

The next chapter examined the significance of art and creativity for these communities. In it, art was shown to be a unifying force in terms of generating a commonality amongst the many subgroups and subcultures that existed throughout the city. Where, by individuals from disparate groups being involved in art, the differences between them were, in part, overcome, allowing them to find a common interest and to essentially integrate into the wider community. In this way separate groups, such as the stylistically distinct subcultures, came together and shared a similar cultural perspective, regardless of the distinctions existing between them.

This was achieved in a number of ways. Firstly, the displaying of ‘art’ provided a space where individuals could gather, in this way it established, not only a reason for socialising, but also the space for socialising. So, at its most basic, art
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generated the places where community members came together. Secondly, it not only generated a physical space for interaction, but also a common cultural space. Through observing the conventions of the art forms involved, individuals were provided with a common set of cultural norms, allowing for relatively easy dialogue to be established amongst the diverse range of individuals at these shows. Third, was the way in which individuals involved in the communities attempted to artfully generate their identity, or to go about producing a public identity and biography that was constructed to be distinct from the others in the group. Individuals thus became like artworks, generating their style out of the many available cultural objects surrounding them. And while not typically considered to be art, this showed how ‘art’ has expanded to incorporate any form of creativity and individual expression, whether it be in the form of painting or the construction of one’s identity. This fact also generated communicative cultural norms of conversation that centred on the popular street culture the individuals used to construct their identities, which contributed to the common cultural space noted above.

Lastly, and most importantly, the significance of art was seen in the way in which it generated a common cultural identity, that of the bohemian artist. Regardless of the locale, social group or subculture, this identity template was heavily utilised and provided another mechanism for generating commonality amongst community members. The bohemian, or the impoverished, impassioned and hedonistic stereotype of the artist, was found in all of the different groups in both
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communities and served the function of providing a common identity that *all* could relate to, regardless of subculture. The actual production of art was not as relevant as performing this role, as it was the enacting of this public persona and not the output of the individual that allowed them to join in the social activities. Essentially this chapter examined the social and cultural effects of art on the studied populations, and the way that it aided in producing a unity amongst community members. But it was not necessarily the act of producing art that generated commonality. Enacting the creative individual, personally developing an ‘individualised’ and ‘authentic’ public persona, as well as participating in the many social engagements, were actually the key elements of artistic activities.

As per the previous chapter, this one showed how the themes of individualisation and community existed concurrently. By individuals using cultural products to generate personalised and highly individualised representations of self, but doing so en-masse, they illustrated how socio-cultural systems could be both individualised and communal, showing once again that the literature suggesting that detraditionalisation and narcissism are leading to social and communal decay is not necessarily correct. This chapter was quite celebratory of art, and also quite favourable disposed towards the mechanisms used to generate commonality. The following chapter, however, examined how art and creativity were used as a mechanism for generating the in-groups and out-groups of the communities, and how creativity was used as a sign of *not* belonging.
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This final chapter illustrated how the themes which were celebrated inside the communities, namely art, passion, individuality, creativity and high levels of socialising, were used to generate the barriers between community members and those outside of the communities. This chapter argued for the necessity of these distinctions, as well as the accompanying arrogance they generated, as a way of marking the unique qualities of community members; making them culturally ‘superior’ to those outside of the community. In essence, the internal celebration of superiority allowed the social and cultural practices that brought the community into existence, as it validated the reason for the distinction from others, and provided a foundation from which all other community processes flowed. So arrogance and self-righteousness is not necessarily destructive, but can actually be quite productive in terms of community formation.

There have been a number of points raised then. The first was the limited applicability that gemeinschaft has as a conceptual tool for community/social research. In the examples provided, social phenomena that were not associated with ‘typical’ community behaviour were shown to still be quite productive in their ability to generate effective community ties. Phenomenon such as superficiality, arrogance, gossip, alcohol and drug use, individualisation, pop culture consumption and performing a constructed identity, which are generally deemed to be the opposite of good community practice, were shown to be intrinsic aspects of the community process. As such, the simplistic ideal of community was shown to be inherently flawed as it ignored many of the
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supposedly ‘unhealthy’ social practices that were actually beneficial to the
development of community relations. And, though related to the first, this is
arguably the second point; that all social interaction, regardless of its unpalatable
nature, can be productive. The decision to limit social observations to those
phenomenon that are in vogue, ‘healthy’ or considered to be ‘natural’ aspects of
community does a disservice to community research, as it omits that which could
have considerable affect on the socio-cultural milieu.

This questioning of simplistic, ‘healthy’ models leads to the final point.
Throughout the thesis numerous references have been made to dystopian social
theory. And while not wishing to discount these theories, their foundations have
been shown to be largely based on idealistic notions of a romanticised past, or to
be blunt, gemeinschaft. The reasoning behind illustrating this was not to prove
late-modern theories invalid, but to point out the continued power of gemeinschaft
as a concept for imagining the social. However, while these dystopian
perspectives were largely supported by empirical evidence, and have been taken
up by the larger sociological community, their reliability as an overall
representation of sociality is questionable, particularly in terms of community.
While individualisation, narcissism, fast capital, oppressive global financial
mechanisms and reduced formal interaction are all legitimate concerns, they do
not equate with the demise of ‘community’ that they generally go on to claim.
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As has been shown in the ethnographies of this thesis, community continues to function, regardless of these social phenomena. However, it is not a simple, or easy to define, form of community. The communities covered were plural, partial, elective, had many functions and were intrinsically complex. They were also not without some form of individualisation, narcissism, cultural change or any of the other supposed signifiers of social fragmentation. As such they showed that while individualisation, and the ‘liquid society’ that is a result of fast capitalism, are social realities, they do not rule out community. The fact that these themes can run concurrently is an indication of the error in attempting to consider communities to be anything less than hugely complex, contextual and fluid social organisms. And it is also an indication that the error in attempting to construe this fluidity as detrimental to society, when it is actually a typical aspect of contemporary urban sociality.

Having established all of this, the question of “so what?” arises. The thesis has demonstrated that a cannon exists in the discourse on community. It has also illustrated that this cannon is highly influenced by quite old ways of describing community. Bolstering it is significant pessimism about contemporary forms of community, a factor that is tied into the business of forming community, where the past is seen as legitimate and the present as lost and diminished. This has brought about norms of celebrating certain social practises and institutions over others, and this is very influential in shaping social policy, particularly at present. And what all this alludes to, especially when social policy is taken into account, is
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that we are potentially setting up governance of the social to preference
‘romantic’ and unattainable forms of social relations.
As an example, a range of Commonwealth, State and local funding regimes
demand community development, community engagement and community
building enterprises that preference ‘strong’ ties and pre-modern forms of social
bonding. However, the point has been made that many forms of sociality do not
function in this way. Also, even though newer forms of sociality are ‘weak’ they
still perform the role of producing social ties, which generate the networks and
common cultures of community.

In terms of policy then, the key themes of this thesis could be taken to show the
significance of building skills in ‘thin’ or ‘weak’ ties, especially amongst young
people. It could be used to show the economic and social benefits of superficiality
or that funding and trying to build gemeinschaft will not work, at least for the
groups this thesis has dealt with. The thesis could also be used to illustrate the
significance of ‘fun’ in developing communities, the power of cultural norms that
allow for individualisation and diversity, and the significance of local customs in
the generation of community, regardless of their focus on debauchery. Finally, the
thesis could be taken up to show the fluid nature of group formation and the
arbitrary use of symbols to represent community belonging. In short, the strength
of the thesis lies in its use as a leverage tool for those working in the community
or social governance field, where it can be used as a tool to prove the validity of
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social forms that are evidently active, but lying outside of ‘allowable’ and ‘acceptable’ norms of community engagement.

As a concluding statement, although this thesis has examined alternative ways of perceiving community, the notion of gemeinschaft has persisted. As shown, it has had incredible academic affect, aiding in the production of many ‘paradise lost’ arguments. However, its presence was also noted in many of the respondents’ definitions of community, but not in its ‘rural idyll’ manifestation. The way in which gemeinschaft was utilised were in the sets of binary oppositions maintained by community members to signify that they were healthier, superior and distinct from others. Though they were generally opposed to the traditional understanding of community, as it was archaic, limiting and based on capital accumulation, they used similar simplistic rhetoric to define both who they were and who they were not. And while they were very quick to vilify the community of others, as being based on simplistic rhetoric, they were far less willing to deconstruct their own simplified notions of their community. So while gemeinschaft may be an outmoded and romanticised notion of communal living, its ideals continue to persist in the minds of populations who constantly position their lifestyle as more natural and healthier than other communities.
References


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Concluding Remarks


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