

Small Towns Conference

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Developing Policy for Australia's Small Towns: From Anthropology to Sustainability

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Public Policy Issue

- State and federal governments have generally not played a leading role in assisting to develop the capacity of small towns
- Historically it has largely been left to the town itself to determine its long-term future

History of Thought into Small Towns: Community and Sustainability Studies

Community Studies Approach

- 1950s and 1960s – Anthropologist Harry Oxley and sociologist Ron Wild
- Challenge the mainstream by recognising that “community matters”
- Internal influences - social classes and status - play large role in confronting local problems and issues

Community Studies Approach

- Long tradition of internal factors studies
- Major examples - Oeser & Emery (1954); Wild (1974); Oxley (1978); Montague (1981); Gray (1991); Tonts & Black (2003)
- Holmes (1979) expressed the concern that the ALP had great difficulty in formulating a policy for country towns, given the type of social stratification that exist in them

Community Studies Approach: Methodology

- Wild (1974) influential example
- Link geography of town and local political system
- Wild lived in town - developed relationships with a wide range of different types of people
- Qualitative, indirect and subjective data obtained while participating in community

Community Studies Approach: Methodology

- Added quantitative, direct and objective method as necessary and complementary
- Quantitative method backing up qualitative method
- Public policy needs to understand the social and cultural dimensions of the town and its citizens

Community Studies Approach: Methodology

- Anthropological view has an implicit public policy agenda
- Resilience and sustainability of small towns provides a rigorous ontology of behaviour in small towns
- This epistemology identifies excluded groups, activities and processes that are central to the resilience of small towns

Sustainability Studies Approach

- Vulnerability of small towns in the face of exogenous structural changes lead to the adoption in the 1990s of the sustainability term to social forces in communities
- Potential to accumulate resources as five “capitals” that enables towns to sustain their social existence
- Capitals: natural, human, social, produced and institutional - Cocklin and Alston (2003)

Sustainability Studies Approach: Methodology

- Measuring “capital” stocks and determining whether over time these stocks are declining or growing absolutely
- Demographics support this approach
- Missing are community sustainable rules and threshold on “carrying capacity” limits that would give a *relative* measure to declining or growing

Sustainability Studies Approach: Methodology

- Social sustainable rules and carrying capacity limits related to these rules can only be understood from a deep anthropological view implicit in the community studies approach
- Social structures and social exclusion embedded in towns are crucial elements that need to be “uncovered”

Sustainability Studies Approach: Methodology

- Policy alternatives have centred on using elements like community learning (Kilpatrick, 2001), clustering (Lowe and Miller, 2001), leadership (Cocklin and Dibden, 2005) and innovation (Lyons, 2001) to build social capital
- But what are the processes in a small town community that will produce and continue to reproduce these social capital elements?

Striking a Balance

- Enhance the sustainability approach by incorporating elements of the communities studies approach
- Striking the balance between deep (anthropological) and the broad (sustainability) in research
- See Figure 1: research framework

Striking a Balance: Methodology

- How stocks of capital vary and how that affects the resilience of the town to cope with external structural changes
- Complexity and cumulative causation
- Anthropology uncovers substrata of capital that can be altered over time by internal factors, as well as external forces
- How a small town responds to external forces and how its own dynamics cumulatively alter over time

Public Policy Implications

- Research framework identifies generalised patterns of small town behaviour which influence the town's responses to external structural changes and also internal conflicts
- Patterns identified support coherent development of a set of policy strategies and actions
- Develop policy in a systematic manner

Conclusion

- Community engagement to investigate internal forces
- Revealing dynamic processes that explain small town resilience and viability
- Learning approaches identified to manage change in local communities that have to cope with powerful external global forces
- Remove *ad hoc* mosaic of policies that affect small towns in many conflicting ways