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The 'community' concept in local government community plans: defining community in regional Australia

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ABSTRACT

The concept of community is synonymous with local governance. It is relied upon to speak to populations and to define the values of a region. This paper draws on an analysis of non-metropolitan local government community plans ($n = 71$) from Queensland, Australia, to examine the ways that the community concept is rendered by local governments. Via a critical discourse analysis of these 'official' documents, we argue that the community concept functions as a signifier of *identity*, *place* and *cohesion*, with these significations outlining how citizens are positioned to contribute to the formation and maintenance of the civic order, and how local governments are operationalised into practice. We argue that this represents a limited interpretation of the community concept and offer a conceptualisation of a more affective and human-centred vision of community as *communitas*. Accordingly, this paper develops theoretical insights into the ways that the discursive framing of concepts like community inform enactments of local governance.

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Not all social categories are so variable in meaning. But those whose meanings are the most elusive, the hardest to pin down, tend to be those hedged around by the most ambiguous symbolism . . .

(Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* 2004:15)

Introduction

Extending Grant and Drew's (2017) observation that 'the concept of community is one that is intrinsically associated with local government' but 'has been defined – and profoundly so – in a variety of ways' (217), we outline in this paper an analysis of the 'community' concept as applied in local government

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community plans. To give clarity to the concept and the ways it is rendered within these documents, the analysis offered here focusses on how 'community' gains configuration to define the 'who' and 'where' of community and the constitutive values that identify *the* community as such. Local government documentation provides a tangible reference for discerning the representational politics (Garg and Pawar 2023; Ghosh 2016; Hickey and Austin 2006) at play in defining communities, with the concept functioning as a symbolically loaded signifier for naming peoples, places and the values they come to be associated with.

Community is a 'slippery notion' (Hamilton 2004) within the discourses of local government. As a 'contested concept' (Mason 2000, 18), community accommodates overlapping meanings to variously explain the characteristics of geographic locations, the identities of populations and the values that are considered intrinsic to peoples and places. Extending R. Williams (1976) categories of definition that associate community with: i) geography and physical space, ii) bonds of shared collectivity, iii) common interest and activity, and iv) the description of congruent attitudes and belief, we argue that the community concept functions within local government discourses as a means for signifying *identity*, *place* and *cohesion* broadly. But beyond the effect of distinguishing 'members from nonmembers' (McMillan 1996, 315) and the assertion of place and shared association, 'community' also contextualises local government responsibilities towards the provision of public services and amenity. We note that the community concept refers to a 'particular kind of social relations' (R. Williams 1976, 76) that implicates the purpose of local government on this transactional basis.

As the level of government committed to the 'promotion of the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of communities' (McKinlay 2006, 5) – through what Dollery, Wallis, and Allan (2006) define as 'an increasing emphasis on "services to people"' (554) – local governments hold a vested interest in establishing a shared sense of 'community' as the location in which the work of governance is performed. Community plans, as public-facing governmental documentation, contain important material and symbolic assertions in this claim towards community, identifying *who* the community *is* and the function that local government fulfils.

Given the definitional variety that comes with the concept, and the general sense that 'whatever the "community" may mean, it is good "to have community"' (Bauman 2001, 1), the analysis in this paper explores the discursive framing of the concept as outlined in a selection of community plans and cognate documents produced by local governments in Queensland, Australia. Focussing on the ways that these documents demarcate 'official' (Apple 2014) accounts of the community concept and the work of local government, we draw attention to the complexities that arise from the deliberate framing of the concept and consider the implications that local

government community plans have on the attribution of identities, characteristics and values to people and places.

The idea of community and local governance

We position the analysis outlined in this paper at the intersection of two phenomena: community and the institution of local government. Although initial deliberations might consider the work of local governance to be *in, of* and *for* the community, it occurs that community functions on both physical and symbolic terms that make situating the idea of community as a function of local governance a complex undertaking. Communities ‘exist’ in that the collectives of individuals that constitute their form can be engaged and encountered. But the *idea* of community – of how these collectives come to be defined and determined on the basis of their form and membership – operates at a more esoteric level; a phenomenon sometimes described conceptually as the ‘spirit’ of a community (Cohen 2004; Ramsden 2016). On this, we echo Hill’s (2024) observation that the tension for local government rests in this conceptual challenge where ‘debate on local government is conducted mainly in pragmatic, not philosophical terms’ in contexts where ‘the need for local government is not a theoretical one but [indicative of] the need for carrying out important public services’ (1). We agree that local government applications of the community concept mediate a ‘practical’ tenor, where community is represented as something tangible, accessible and able to be engaged. The analysis that follows in the latter sections of this paper argues this case, with insights geared to decoding how community gains particular discursive form to mobilise local government practice in deliberate ways.

An emerging literature reveals how practical renderings of the community concept leverage accounts of the presence and function of local governance. As an example, the literature examining local governance of natural disaster (Johnston, Taylor, and Ryan 2022; Oktari et al. 2018; Peng et al. 2020) positions community as the site of the upheavals caused by disaster events and the location of practical local government intervention. Community under this rendering functions as a physically constituted entity and through which initiatives to ‘rebuild’ and ‘recover’ are directed. Similarly, literature dedicated to community ‘empowerment’ (Purwanda 2022) place emphasis on community as a site of *action*. An empowered community functions as a location of resilience and rejuvenation where local government initiatives toward the enhancement of social capital generate strong(er) communities. Notably, literature dedicated to community engagement (H. Christensen 2019; Hickey, Reynolds, and McDonald 2015; King and Cruickshank 2012) applies a similar logic where community represents a locus of action; a theme that also carries in the literature dedicated to community capacity building (Cuthill and Fien 2005; Wallis and Dollery 2002).

We draw attention to this literature as a way of illustrating Hill's (2024) observations regarding the 'pragmatic' function of community in the parlance of local governance and the discursive renderings that such applications apply. The focus of this paper works at this important intersection, and as the analysis outlined in the subsequent sections will show, these mobilisations of the community-concept open out as many challenges as they resolve in their attempts to pin-down the concept in practical form. As we will illustrate, it is the dual nature of the community concept in signifying both practical *and* symbolic dimensions that the challenge materialises, with the renderings of the community concept applied in local government literature pointing to both the functional applications of local governance and ideals of civic unity (Anderson 1983).

Discerning the idea of community

Our analysis drew on a selection of designated community plans and cognate documents (including associated community consultation findings, service schedules and corporate plans) ($n = 71$), produced by non-metropolitan shire and regional local governments situated in Queensland, Australia. The rationale underpinning this decision to restrict the dataset to 'non-metropolitan' local government plans corresponds with the socio-economic context of local governance in Queensland and the significance that the community concept holds for defining a sense of identity and place in these settings (Hickey et al. 2024).

Local governments in Queensland are legislatively required¹ to declare the processes they utilise to 'engage' their communities, with the provision of designated community plans representing a prominent means for achieving this remit (H. Christensen 2019; H. E. Christensen and McQuestin 2018). As a site of the discursive rendering of the work of local governance and the identification of community as both a concept and phenomenon, documentation such as community plans signify a deliberate assertion of an 'official' (Apple 2014) account of community that frames the community concept with meaning and practical bearing. This is to say that the rendering of the community concept applied in these documents provides reference for how it is understood and enacted in physical settings.

The specific provision of community plans in Queensland emerged from changes to the legislation in 2009 with the advent of the current *Local Government Act 2009* and subsequent *Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment 2012*. Notably, changes emergent from the *Amendment* opened the capacity for local governments 'to plan for the community in the way they know best' (Queensland Government 2012a, 4), with the relative autonomy afforded by this change enabling local government agencies the capacity to plan and enact community engagement

agendas in contextually relevant and meaningful ways. Yet, this also opens the possibility for varied approaches to the engagement of community, and in turn, commensurate variability in the ways community is defined. It is evident when reading community plans from local governments across Queensland that varied interpretations of the requirements specified in the *Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment 2012* are apparent, with plans demonstrating differential complexity in defining community and the settings of community-focussed agendas.

This also exposes the peculiar geographic and economic conditions inherent to local governance in Queensland. Queensland's local governments extend across 77 local government authorities arranged by City Councils (8), Regional Councils (28), and Shire Councils (40; including 28 Shire and 12 Aboriginal Shire Councils). Queensland also includes one Town Authority – Weipa Town Council (Queensland Government 2025). We note this spread of local government areas in terms of the stark distinctions that exist between Queensland's metropolitan and regional locations. Queensland's metropolitan centres support high-density populations situated in relatively small geographic spaces. By contrast, Queensland's regional and shire authorities support disparate populations spread across significantly larger geographic areas. It also occurs that regional and (especially) shire councils operate under constrained economic conditions. The Queensland Audit Office (2024) observed that 'at 30 June 2023, 48 councils (2021–22: 46 councils) are still at either a moderate or a high risk of not being financially sustainable' (1), with this startling insight revealing the financial pressures that associate with governance in non-metropolitan Queensland.

The conjoined challenge of expansive geography and economic constraint in locations that exhibit unique characteristics (and requirements) gives especial importance to the ways that community is defined and conceptualised in these settings. Community plans are often deployed as a means to consolidate a sense of the constitution and characteristics of regional and remote communities, and it is for this reason that we have focussed on Queensland's regional and shire local government areas to consider the ways the community concept gains form and definition.

The regional imaginary

Locations beyond Australia's metropolitan centres hold a particular place in the Australian cultural imaginary (Blainey 1966; Smith 2011). Contextualised on the basis of spatiality and geography of the Australian landscape, the regional locale represents a site of an *authentic* Australia, where the non-metropolitan 'rural idyll' (Horton 2008) conjures imagery of bucolic harmony and social cohesion. As a vast, but sparsely populated continent, Australia's non-metropolitan locations carry this imaginary of kinship and the tight-

bonds of ‘solidarity ... of socially constituted individuals’ (Cohen 2004, 24). Although the metropolitan local government areas excluded from this analysis ($n = 8$) maintain comprehensive Community Plans and articulate comprehensive accounts of what constitutes community, we were interested in how Queensland’s shire and regional councils framed a sense of their constitutive populations and locations in context of these wider imaginings of Australia’s non-metropolitan locations.

Given the vast disparity in the spread of Australia’s population, where ‘Australia’s population is concentrated in the major cities, which are home to 73% of the total population’ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024: n.p), it is notable that the regional locale functions as a distinct geographic *and* symbolic formation that is dependent on defined imaginaries of identity that link space *with* experience. As Gorman-Murray (2008) observes:

The rural landscape – the countryside – is often imagined as the ‘heartland’ of the modern Western nation-state – a source of national identity and a storehouse for values ‘lost’ through the experience of progress, modernity and industrialisation. (n.p.)

It is significant, then, that the lived experience is often at odds with the imaginary. Although functioning as a ‘storehouse’ for values and characteristics considered ‘lost’ in larger metropolitan spaces, Australia’s regional locations are sites of distinct socio-economic disparity (Lock et al. 2012; T. Williams, Lakhani, and Spelten 2022). The regions are also settings of reduced social opportunity, with prospects for employment and educational pathways especially limited (Chesters and Cuervo 2022; Cuervo 2014; Halsey 2018). In what McMahon (2010) identifies as the ‘collision between myth and historical materiality’ (180), sustained socio-economic distinctions mark non-metropolitan spaces in ways that render the community concept as centrally important. We argue that this places significance on the presence and function of local government community plans as documents that seek to define the idea(l) of community in locations where the lived experience is often challenging.

In this present moment, characterised as it is by social dislocation, economic hardship and societal crisis (Adams et al. 2023) community represents an evocative ideal. Although the community concept invokes a sense of cohesion, warmth and care ‘as an embodiment of the local and place-specific’ (Dinnie and Fischer 2020, 244), the practice of mobilising services and the provisioning of resources across vast geographic spaces to dispersed communities is a complex, expensive and contested undertaking. The legislative requirement of local government to engage community combines with a social imperative to ensure cohesion and connection and it is on this basis that our analysis of the selected community plans proceeded.

Method

The community plans and associated documentation collated for this paper were identified using a keyword search of the relevant local government jurisdictions' websites. Documentation from the Brisbane City, Gold Coast City, Ipswich City, Logan City, Redland City, and Townsville City Councils was removed from the dataset in alignment with the regional focus of this analysis. Although designated as 'cities', documents from Mount Isa City and the City of Moreton Bay were included given that both service notable regional areas beyond the metropolitan centres they administrate from. Each document included in the dataset was available as a public-facing, web-accessible document endorsed by the local government authority, with each current at the time of writing.² *Table 1* provides a listing of the plans accessed and analysed.

The analysis of the documents was undertaken using a derivation of Wodak's (2015) critical discourse analytic approach. Critical Discourse Analysis was utilised as a useful method for interrogating the ways that the community concept is given specific meaning within the selection of documents analysed in this paper., Providing a means for decoding the 'relationship between texts, social events, social practices and social structures' (Fairclough 2007, 22) Critical Discourse Analysis afforded insight into the constitutive function that concepts have to 'enact social relations between participants in social events' (27).

In this paper, focus is given to the semantic application of the community concept, and how this prescribes certain renderings of the concept that in turn speaks to the practices of local governance. While we do not (due to the limitations of space and the specificity that such an empirical inquiry would require) explore the material *outcomes* of these semantic framings (including the practices that these uses of the community concept generate), our interest here is centred on defining the range of meanings that community conveys within these documents and what this in turn suggests about the community concept in local government parlance. Such a focus on the ways concepts are 'used in a particular way' opens out the capacity to understand how language is applied 'to constitute the social order' (Fairclough 2007, 206). This is a primary concern of Critical Discourse Analysis, with the remit of this method to understand 'the rules which "govern" bodies of text and utterances' (124).

To mobilise this concern towards the discursive framing of the community concept, the selected plans and associated documents were analysed against the following questions, as adapted from Wodak (2015):

- (1) How is community named and referred to?
- (2) What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to the community concept?
- (3) What descriptors are employed linguistically and stylistically within the document to contextualise the community concept?

Following an initial cycle of analysis, through which the documents were read with reference to analytic question 1, a selection of data elements was collated. These data elements included direct textual references to selections from the larger documents, and within which direct inferences to community were made. A second round of analysis involved a more intensive axial coding (Saldaña 2013) of these data elements to ascertain the specific rendering of the community concept in each instance. As a second cycle of analysis, this stage was important for determining the application of particular meanings to the community concept, per analytic question 2. The analysed selections were then considered in terms of the *discursive framing*³ that applied to each usage, with the application of analytic question 3 providing nuanced insights into the ways community was issued conceptual depth. The themes derived from this analysis are detailed in the following section.

Analysis: defining and affirming the community concept

Four categories of meaning relevant to the rendering of the community concept emerged from the analysis. Within the selected community plans, community was discursively framed as:

- (1) Physical space, discernible in terms of geography and location: *community as locale*.
- (2) Collective grouping, defined in terms of common purpose or association: *community as collectivity*.
- (3) Character, indicated through shared sentiment: *community as ethos*.
- (4) Kinship, indicated by communal bonds and cultural ties; *community as culture*.

These broad thematic designations provided categories for considering the uses of the community concept as rendered in the selected community plans. We turn now to illustrate how the documentation cast specific applications of each category.

Community as locale

Perhaps unsurprisingly, community was often rendered in terms of geographic space, with locatedness *in* space designating the specific 'setting' of

the community . On this, we note Keller's (2003) observation that the 'territorial connotation of community is surely the most familiar and ... the most basic' (6). Describing community in geo-spatial terms, this rendering of community was evident in examples including the following:

While we're acting in the here and now, we can't lose sight of the big picture or of the many external factors having a direct impact on our region. Our global physical footprint is small, but our region's global impact is big, as we continue to feed, power, and build communities. (Isaac Region 2023–2028 Community-Corporate Plan)

'Lockyer – Our Valley, Our Vision' Community Plan 2027 details the community's vision for the Lockyer Valley to the year 2027. It is a plan that describes the type of region our community aspires to live in, in the future. (Lockyer Valley Community Plan 2017–2027)

Emphasised within the community-as-locale theme were references to the peculiarity of the physical settings in question. Mention of the physical amenity and beauty of the locale, the natural resources available in these spaces, and the setting's capacity for employment and industrial capability defined community not only in geo-spatial terms, but as *resource rich* . Community in these uses was discernible in terms of *locatedness*, but qualified on the basis of the amenity this geography provides:

The vision encapsulates the potential for the Goondiwindi Region to transition to a prosperous 21st Century regional economy by capitalising on its traditional industry strengths and promoting new forms of high-value economic activity consistent with the community's aspirations to represent 'Regional Australia at its best'. (Goondiwindi Regional Council Corporate Plan 2024–2028)

A region of diverse communities. All our communities have a unique character. Beaudesert is a growing centre that retains a relaxed rural feel and is surrounded by productive farms. (Scenic Rim Community Plan 2011–2026)

Although it is not surprising that local government agencies would utilise their plans to declare and name the special features and 'richness' of the geography they govern, this conflation of geography *with* amenity inflected expressions of community towards a wider sense of *abundance*:

A region of natural beauty, it boasts access to the iconic waters of Moreton Bay (the region's namesake) and the D'Aguilar mountain range. We have extensive waterways, wetlands and bushland corridors with an abundance of wildlife, much of which is of national and international significance. (Moreton Bay Corporate Plan 2022–2027)

Boasting a relaxed small coastal lifestyle and a sense of community, we take pride in our beaches, river, park and open spaces and we maximise these assets in supporting our active and healthy community. (Burrum Heads Community Plan 2020–2030)

We echo Keller's (2003) observation that 'community always denotes a there' (6) but expand this observation by noting that the 'there' of community is specified further qualification according to the abundance it affords. It is in terms of the amenity afforded by (and *within*) the geographic location of the community that determinations of the character and identity of the community become apparent:

We want community spaces that are attractive & encourage opportunities for social connections. (South Burnett Community Plan 2032)

Toowoomba has built on its garden image to become Australia's largest inland regional city; a hub of one of Australia's most attractive regions, blending the best of both city and country lifestyle. The temperate climate, strong economy, community spirit, access to arts, culture, health and education services, and beautiful parks and broader landscape continually attracts new residents and business investment. (Toowoomba Region corporate Plan 2024–2029)

Community as collectivity

Declaring the geo-spatial locatedness and abundance inherent to the community provided a prominent coordinate in the plans surveyed for this paper. But equally important is the naming and identification of the people the community supports. This inflection of the community concept emphasised the 'human' dimension of community, whereby the bonds of *collectivity* shared by (and common to) residents of the locale gave form and definition to the community concept. It is notable that the community plans moved to describe the people who reside within these spaces as a qualifier of the geographic amenity apparent in these settings. This move from defining *where we are* to *who we are* represented a thematic trope across each plan.

The human dimension of community is usefully affirmed in Day's (2006) observation that 'we would not be human if we did not feel some sense of identification and solidarity with the others around us and share in their experiences and expectations' (2). For local government, mediating a sense of shared identity proceeds on the basis of establishing 'the something in between that binds [the collective] into a whole greater than the sum of individual existences' (Grange 1999, 176). But beyond merely indicating the shared aspects of community – of the experience of living *in* community with like-others – the documentation extended these claims towards collectivity by inferring how residents would participate in and represent community through particular modes of engagement and expressions of citizenry. The documentation contained a range of pronouncements that spoke to the virtues, aspirations and responsibilities that came with being part of the community:

The Western Downs region will be known for its active and healthy population. Both physical and mental health will be improved by a clean and green environment, social networks, active lifestyles, preventative health initiatives, community education and leading practice health services. (Western Downs 2050 Community Plan)

Here, the demonstration of an active citizenry is apparent wherein individuals are called to participate in wider social ‘networks’ to promote ‘active lifestyles’, support positive health and enact learning. The following provides a further example:

Our Vision

(What Council wants to achieve in the future).

Strong Puuya, Strong Culture, Strong Future.

Our values

The following are the core values that the Council has embraced:

- Honesty Integrity
- Fairness
- Working and Learning Together
- Being Positive
- Respect for Culture
- Accountability

Our mission statement

To lead, strengthen and serve the community by providing high quality levels of services and opportunities for you and me.

(Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council 2023–2028 Corporate Plan).

Beyond declaring values that might be considered noble and virtuous, the notable aspect of these examples corresponds with the shared responsibility that is called upon to progress the interests of community. Citizens are expected to uphold values that are considered important to the collective and that define citizenry in this locale. But equally, the role of local government is also declared, wherein a social contract exists between citizens and local government; one geared to building strong communities. Here, local government works to ‘lead, strengthen and serve’ while citizens ‘embrace’ values considered important to the maintenance of community ties and active citizenry. The civic responsibility implied in these pronouncements establishes the prerogatives that drive community formation whilst setting the coordinates for the partnership between local government and the populace:

Affordable and appropriate housing will be available for the community as one of the essentials for stable and healthy lifestyle . . . Communities work together to reduce crime and social problems. (Western Downs 2050 Community Plan)

Invoking imagery of representative modes of participation and active citizenry (Hickey and Phillips 2013; Phillips and Hickey 2013), this shared responsibility towards the generation of an engaged and participatory community presents as a feature of the social dynamic:

[Council will] work in collaboration with our fellow community groups for the benefit of the whole community. (Kowanyama Aboriginal Shire Council Corporate Plan 2018–2022)

Although entreating imagery of approachable, caring and engaged local governance, these suggestions nonetheless invoke the logic of a ‘social contract’ (Loewe, Zintl, and Houdret 2021) where ‘working together’ provides a prevailing ethic for realising a shared sense of community.

Community as ethos

The *community-as-ethos* theme extends from the *community-as-collectivity* theme by establishing criteria for how citizens should come together ‘as’ community. Here, the plans defined distinct dispositional characteristics required of citizens for ‘achieving’ community. This translated within the plans via prescriptive statements around how community should be experienced and lived, which in turn established a normative ethics for enacting a community-oriented citizenship:

Our Council delivers sustainable, quality services with a community focus, where our people enjoy their work, are empowered to undertake their roles, and are valued for their contributions. (Toowoomba Region Corporate Plan 2024–2029)

Extending beyond the criteria for merely participating in community, this theme moved to establish the *dispositions* through which community would be enacted and experienced (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Two distinct variations of this theme were evident across the documents. First, the identification of the values that define community were declared as prompts toward forms of engagement and participation considered important to the expression of community:

We are a proud, caring, involved, safe, secure and family friendly community with health, education, and community services and infrastructure that meet our changing needs. (Flinders Shire Community Plan 2011–2021)

Second, a call to citizens to conduct themselves in the ‘spirit’ of these prompts inferred prescriptive purpose to the lives citizens should lead:

What our communities can do to contribute:

- Participate in and support local networks, activities, events and festivals.
- Join our 'Your Say Moreton Bay' engagement platform and events to share your ideas and provide feedback on our projects that matter to you.
- Subscribe to the Healthy and Active Moreton eNewsletter and participate in our Healthy and Active Moreton and Active Holiday programs providing free or low-cost activities.
- Get involved in the cultural and creative identity of the region, through active participation in museum, gallery and library programs, as well as local creative performances and experiences. (Moreton Bay Regional Council Corporate Plan 2022-2027)

The positioning of community as partner in the creation of community is significant, and when read in context of the commitments that local government makes to the provision of services, implies the shared responsibility that community building requires. Although the realities of engagement and participation draw on far larger considerations regarding the capacity and opportunity individual citizens have towards community formation (with socio-economic, mobility, and spatial considerations especially important in framing how citizens might demonstrate their active participation), it remains that this rendering of community draws upon the enactment of commitment and the upholding of normative principles of living. This dispositional approach to participation defines community as an *ethos* that is enacted and experienced by its citizenry.

Community as culture

Especially prominent in the community plans developed by Aboriginal Shire Councils, *culture* defined a further rendering of the community concept:

The Cherbourg Council in partnership with the community of Cherbourg will strive to:

- Provide a clean, safe and healthy community. Will work to improve the health and well-being of our people.
- Consistently empower community to become self-reliant/independent.
- Empower/encourage our youth to determine their future through self respect, education, training, cultural and traditional values.
- Provide a caring, respectful and safe environment for our elders.

Whilst respecting and upholding traditional, cultural and Christian values and beliefs, we will strive to maintain our identity, our Aboriginality, our culture and respect for each other.

(Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council Corporate Plan 2020–2025).

Social Wellbeing

Goal – A vibrant community that is safe, healthy and proud of their culture and traditions and embraces diversity. (Lockhart River Aboriginal Shire Council 2023–2028 Corporate Plan).

Apart from giving reference to this region's first nations peoples – which itself is significant in terms of recognising Australia's Indigenous cultures and systems of social organisation that have existed since before European settlement – the sentiment attached to the positioning of culture as a marker of community highlighted tradition, heritage, and language as foundational elements of community.

Notably, this rendering of community-as-culture drew attention to geography (*country*) as a site of culture, but within which tradition and heritage provided descriptive markers of the expression of community (Moreton-Robinson 2020):

Our region has been home to the Kabi Kabi, Jinibara and Turrbal peoples for thousands of years. Today it is home to many communities from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and welcomes visitors from all part of Australia and around the world. (Moreton Bay Corporate Plan 2022–2027)

As a community we welcome, respect and encourage opinions, traditions and cultures from a wide range of audiences and appreciate that diversity is a strong pillar of our community. We encourage participation and inclusion in our community clubs, organisations, businesses and celebrations. (Burrum Heads Community Plan 2020–2030)

The languages and cultures evident in a region represent a point of pride and uniqueness that frame the identity of the community.

Discussion: mobilising the idea of community

Although the renderings of the community concept evident in these selections point to four distinct categories of definition, a larger set of considerations surround the general framing of the community concept in its local government usage. Extending the discussion in the early sections of this paper, we note that the community plans and cognate documentation produced by local governments function primarily as a response to governance and accountability requirements. On this point, H. Christensen's (2019) observations of the five prerogatives that guide local government rationales are pertinent:

First is the quest for better and more democratic outcomes resulting from participatory processes. Second, governments seek increased legitimacy through these practices, in an environment of community activism and increasing distrust of government. Third, community engagement may be undertaken as a response to increasing demands from communities. Fourth, the advent of technology has made it easier and more cost effective for governments to

engage with their communities. Fifth – and perhaps less noble – is the desire of governments to broaden the base of their decision-making responsibilities – and thereby share the potential blame for poor decisions. (2)

Local government attempts to name and define community may appear as laudable, and indeed we are not suggesting that these approaches are not well-intentioned. But it remains that the requirements inherent to the *Local Government Act 2009* and *Amendment 2012* (in the Queensland context) frame these attempts within a larger paradigm of governance and accountability, which in turn inflects how local governments approach and understand their communities. The viewpoints and positionalities that arise from these 'official' declarations of community reinforce a view of community on these transactional terms, with the categories identified in the above analyses speaking to this larger paradigmatic remit.⁴

The problem that this presents extends into the limited rendering of community these definitions provide. Here, community represents a form of citizenship in which civic responsibility is mediated through participatory forms of engagement. As the analyses indicate, community is reduced to intentioned forms of participation that occur in defined spaces (*community as locale*), under the guise of shared association (*community as collectivity*; *community as culture*) and for the purpose of civic engagement (*community as ethos*). Even when calls for more deliberative senses of the community concept were evident – an example includes the Cairns Regional Council's intent to 'encourage communities to help shape the future by actively participating in their own creation' (2011: 11) – the purpose of these attempts nonetheless reverts to a version of community that emphasises civic responsibility.

This is no bad thing *per se*, and we are not suggesting that civic responsibility is itself a problem. But when this represents the predominant way of defining community – indeed, the *only* way of defining community – the range of meanings associable with community remain limited. This is even more pressing when it is considered that local governments hold within their purview the capacity to define deeper renderings of the concept.

One such way a wider rendering of the community concept might be achieved is by liberating the concept from its current functional focus. Here, we suggest that understanding community as *communitas* and as that which is 'profoundly communal and shared' (Turner 1969/1991, 126) offers possibilities. Rather than remaining geared to a functional, transactional remit, community as *communitas* might instead work towards understanding the collective condition and experience of community:

... *communitas* refers to spaces in which mundane life can be temporarily transcended through the acknowledgement of co-humanity. (Haggar 2024, 4)

This is a more affective rendering of the community concept, where *communitas* affords a way of thinking about community not as a product of certain practices and functions of governance, but as something more organic and emergent. *Communitas* taps into the experience of community, and reverts the locus of community to the individuals, practices and experiences that ‘make’ the community. In context of increasingly stark economic, ecological and social fracturings, and where the experience of life in non-metropolitan settings is defined by limited access to amenity and resources (Hickey et al. 2024), we argue that moving the idea of community towards *communitas* presents one such way to expand a more deliberative, purposeful and *human* vision of community. This will require local governments to move beyond the functional overtones evident in their current plans, to instead pursue a vision of community that prefaces a ‘transcendental feeling of oneness that is essential to *communitas*’ (Haggard 2024, 17).

Further empirical research that investigates the practical applications and lived experience of community may point to variances and inconsistencies in the ways community comes to be lived, and where the limits of its existing discursive framing reside *in practice*. An empirical, sociological account of this type would work to expose the differences that exist between ‘social events and the attitudes, desires and values’ that ‘connect texts with their situational contexts’ (Fairclough 2007, 27). The intent of such an inquiry might be to understand points of translation, and indeed, resistance, in the ways texts like community plans inform and mediate experience. In this paper, we have focussed on a *prior* state of analysis – the discursive framing of the community concept evident across a selection of community plans and cognate documents – and suggest that this represents a necessary first stage in any investigation of community. Understanding how the concept gains meaning and form in extant ways provides a basis for linking ‘the relationship of the text to the event, to the wider physical world and social world’ (27).

The value that Critical Discourse Analysis provides is evident on this front, and in terms of the utility of this method of analysis, it emerged that examining the ways that concepts like ‘community’ gain dimension and purpose provides a basis for interrogating the nexus between policy and practice. Governance in this sense *proceeds through* the discursive rendering of concepts like community to shape how the populations local government supports come to be understood and engaged.

Conclusion

‘Community’ conjures evocative ideals of cohesion and inclusion (Bauman 2001; Cohen 1994). Community represents the tight bonds of *gemeinschaft*, where the ‘local’ is evident and the social bonds that define a collective gain meaning. This articulation of community gives rise to associated applications

of community ‘as an embodiment of the local and place-specific’ (Dinnie and Fischer 2020, 244), a definition which is particularly pertinent to local government.

The analysis outlined in this paper demonstrated that the community concept is applied within local government against four predominant applications: i) community as locale, ii) community as collectivity, iii) community as ethos, and iv) community as culture. But as the discussion above identifies, these applications remain limited in the renderings they provide, and in turn generate limited visions of what constitutes community. As a transactional function of local government, community is reduced to the amenity available in a defined location, the responsibilities citizens have to the collective, and the obligations local governments hold in ensuring the provision of services.

What is not so apparent in these renderings is the sentiment that comes with being a part of the community and the ways shared points of recognition draw from and inform the lived experience of community. This represents a challenge for local governments whose remit it is to not only define community but to set aspirational agendas for the populations they serve. When geared to legislative requirements that emphasise governance and accountability, the community concept takes form as a function of local governance, and not as an expression of human group interaction; of *being together*. There is an opportunity for local governments to define far richer accounts of community that draw on the *communitas* of shared association, experience and the knowledge that comes from the traditions and heritage of being collectively in-context. To restore the meaning of community as an ‘integrative’ element of group organisation (Cohen 2004, 20) – as a ‘... way of thinking, feeling, believing ...’ (Kluckhohn 1962, 25) – local government community plans should look beyond their legislative remit to include more intensive accounts of the human experience.

A first step in this remit will be to interrogate how concepts like community gain meaning and conceptual form in local governmental documentation. Utilising Critical Discourse Analysis to decode the meanings that associate with the community concept provided a basis for deliberating on the links between government policy and the practices that associate with life in community, with the contribution of such an approach centred on the exposure it provides for understanding how governance proceeds *through* materials like community plans.

Notes

1. The *Local Government Regulation 2012* (Queensland Government 2024) requires local governments to ‘outline the local government’s goals, strategies and policies for implementing the local government’s vision for the future of the

local government area' (s.166), with community plans functioning as a component of wider corporate planning agendas.

2. Although several of the accessed community plans had expired.
3. 'Discursive framing' refers to a central tenet in Critical Discourse Analysis per the ways that concepts draw inflection and meaning in 'framed' ways. This is to say that the way a concept is used within a specific context to mean in certain ways speaks to its framing. In this paper, the discursive framing of *community* indicates the ways the concept is applied as an expression and confirmation of *locality*, *collectivity*, *ethos* and *culture*.
4. As one such document identified for this paper declares '[the] plan... puts in place the structure that will make this vision [of community] a reality' (Western Downs Regional Council 2011).

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