

The relationship between the individual and groups

Introduction

Understanding certain social processes that occur in a society, it is inevitable to look at how it is constructed as each community is built up by individuals and they have a relationship both with each other and with groups themselves. These ties that interlink the people and groups co-operate through rules and common understandings, which define the functioning of the society. Thus, through these shared and agreed 'regulations' social systems are created, which "can only exist because human behavior is not random, but to some extent predictable. [...] We make such predictions continuously, and the vast majority of them are so banal that they pass completely unnoticed. But for each prediction of behavior, we try to take both the person and the situation into account" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 22). By doing so, we establish certain relationships with each other that allow us to operate collectively on a daily basis. As a result, a more or less well functioning society is created that has members who all contribute to its existence to a certain level.

The aim of the current essay is to introduce how the individual and the community exist together in a symbiotic relationship. In order to observe this phenomenon, we will have a look at Breiger's (1974) study on "The duality of persons and groups", and provide an actual case study through which it can be better exemplified how the two co-exist and are linked together. Through this example we will also be looking at Hofstede's (2001) theory on "individualism and collectivism" merged with Goffman's (1971) definitions of groups and individuals, and the "ties" that connect them. Additionally, we will take a glance at Schwartz and Sortheix's (2018) concept of the "subjective well-being" so that we can interpret the individuals' decision making process better in relation to the community. All of these works revolve around similar notions: the relationship between the individual and the community. By defining this relation and observing its characteristics, the aim is to obtain a more specific idea on the societal structures that define our everyday activities, as it seems to be one of the key mechanisms of the social dynamics that makes us function.

The scope of study

It is important to keep in mind that any given community is always comprised of individuals, who have their own thoughts, desires, experiences that define their identity and existence: “Individuals come together (or, metaphorically, “intersect” one another) within groups, which are collectivities based on the shared interests, personal affinities, or ascribed status of members who participate regularly in collective activities. At the same time, the particular patterning of an individual’s affiliation (or the “intersection” of groups within the person) defines his points of reference and (at least partially) determines his individuality” (Breiger, 1974, p. 181). Such individuality which is built up by the said statuses and affiliations are part of one’s identity which is also constituted by other factors. For example, one of the key elements in defining one’s identity is the community itself (Hofstede, 2001), which will be described later. Nonetheless, in a society, even though each member shares an approximately similar cultural identity, there are small or subtle differences that can cause tension and conflict within the community. This phenomena can be described as the previously mentioned dichotomy of “individualism and collectivism” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 209). In order to better understand how this works in practice, we will be looking at examples from two sample locations, which will serve as case studies for the present research. One of the locations is Calabria, Italy, and the other one in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county in Hungary. By comparing these two regions an attempt will be made to find out more about the way young individuals (the so called ‘Millennials’, those who were born between the 1980s and mid-1990s) are part of the community they are from, and how they distance themselves after having lived far from these areas. How do the ties between the hometowns (the group) and the individual change? What do the relations look like once they have left these areas, and when they attempt to return? How do they identify themselves? How did the community influence the individuals’ choices? These and similar questions will be answered in the course of this research in the hope to better understand the process through which Millennials have left behind their homes and are now trying to cope with the results of their decisions.

Individualism vs. collectivism

To begin with, there are so called “mental programs” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 21), which develop from birth as we are being influenced first by our closest relatives and later by teachers, peers, friends and colleagues. Through daily interactions we become capable of deciding what is right or wrong, what values to consider important and what to neglect more. The individual exists in

a community that is built up by other individuals who then establish the various systems (values, judgement, opinions) themselves by continuous feedbacking, re-evaluation, and re-assessment. Individualism and collectivism go hand-in-hand in every culture and “[i]t is reflected in the way people live together – for example, in nuclear families, extended families, or tribes – and it has many implications for values and behavior. In some cultures, individualism is seen as a blessing and a source of well-being; in others, it is seen as alienating” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 209). If the culture promotes individualism over collectivism, they would be more prone to find their own path in life, pursue education or a career based on such elements that aid their own prosperity rather than that of the family or the community they come from. As a result, they would be more inclined to leave the home environment in search of something more satisfying or challenging than what they were being offered originally. Furthermore, the so-called “self-concept” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 211) defines whether a person considers himself as an individual or part of a community. Based on this self image they will make decisions about choices that are either best for themselves or for the community.

Turning to the case studies: based on conversations with the locals firstly in Calabria a phenomenon emerged that they called the ‘Mezzogiorno question’. This situation can be best described as the depopulation and desolation of the Southern regions of Italy by a large number of the population. These migrants usually seek work and settlement in the North or abroad. In addition, this area is generally associated with high unemployment rates and poverty. Furthermore, a narrative of dissatisfaction has emerged from the Millennials who have left Calabria, how they developed an ambivalent attitude towards the region: they are unhappy to live somewhere else but cannot seem to find a way to move back. After having observed the situation in Italy, it became apparent that a similar process has been on-going in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county in Hungary. By looking at its financial, economic and social status within Hungary, it becomes immediately apparent that Borsod is also suffering from depopulation and decay compared to the more central parts of the country. Even though in Hungary the youth’s migration is more towards the capital, Budapest, rather than one larger area like in the case of Italy, a similar migration process can be observed in both countries: from the periphery to the center.

If we look at Calabria and Borsod county, the fact that some people have left their home and started a new path can be considered as a choice of individualist character. They gave up their ability to be a constructive member of the community, they have decided not to continue certain traditions and not to build the future of the region. By leaving, they have carried away

their knowledge, expertise and potency to somewhere else where these will be applied and benefited from. When looking at this process, an important question arises, however, which is whether these individuals decide to transfer to a place where they already know someone or they know of someone who has done the same thing, or do they choose a place where they have to start everything from scratch and build relationships, establish their existential circumstances all by themselves?

According to Goffman (1971) “the individual is linked to society through two principal social bonds: to collectivities through membership and to other individuals through social relationships. He in turn helps make a network of society by linking through himself the social units linked to him” (p. 188). However, based on Breiger’s (1974) work it could also be possible that individuals are “linked to other individuals by bonds of common membership (as in interlocking directorates) or to the collectivities through social relationships (as in “love” of one’s country or “fear” of a bureaucracy)” (p. 183). Firstly, the “membership” described by Goffman (1971) could be defined as the role of the ‘migrant’ that one takes up when decides to leave one’s homeland (now we use the example of our case studies only, as there are various kinds of migrations and reasons for it which will not be the main focus here). Consequently, one would be linked to a collectivity of migrants who share a similar path, decision- and thought-making process as the others and thus they become grouped together within the society. The individuals are not specifically linked to one another because they do not necessarily have any social obligations to one another, and they might not even know about each other. For instance, the individual who has left Szerencs, his hometown in Hungary behind to attend university in Budapest, and the other who has done the same by leaving Catanzaro in Italy to start working in Milan share the same path in the sense that they have relocated but might not share any other common features at all. They belong to the collectivity of the migrants – thus they have a bond “to the collectivities through membership” (Goffman, 1971, p. 188) as well as they are “linked to other individuals by bonds of common membership” (Breiger, 1974, p. 183) but they are not linked to one another in either way through “social relationship” (Goffman, 1971; Breiger, 1974). In order for these individuals to share also such relationship, they would have to engage in certain interactions with each other so that they can acquire the roles necessary for the situation as “[i]t is seen that the individual is obliged to engage in specific activity in established situations, a bundle of obligatory dealings in each type of situation. Those whom he deals with in one type of situation have a role relationship to him. When he deals with the same individual in more than one type of situation, he has more than one role relationship to him, resulting in

an "over-all" relationship that is "multi-bonded" (Goffman, 1971, p. 188). Additionally to Breiger's (1974) work on the group and individuals discussed so far, it is important to mention Harrison White's concept of "cat-net" which defines how certain connections are formed based on shared attributes. This describes the duality of collective entities constituted by perceived categorical similarity and patterns of interaction based on relational cohesion and structural equivalence (Fokas et al., 2020, p. 3). By observing the factors of whether they have travelled alone or to a community they have known previously it could modify our way of looking at the individualism these people assert by their choices. Furthermore, the choices of the new location might be worth looking at too in order to understand the values they hold onto, if they are moving to an environment similar to the original one or they try to establish or join a community that gives them some sort of familiarity and thus comfort of the known. How does this work in practice?

The dragons and us

When talking to some people who have lived abroad for a longer period of time, it is often mentioned that they prefer to 'hang out' with and meet other foreigners rather than the natives of the country because they feel they share a certain familiar experience, they are remote and alone together in a new environment. This sensation might help them create a community in which they can represent and practice their cultural attributes and by joining together with others, they sort of alienate themselves from the strange environment in which they live – they create a shelter that can serve as a basis of collectivity and thus ending their individualistic role. As described by Hankiss (1977) we tend to invent so-called "dragons" which we create in order to cope with certain persons or other cultures that we consider alien or hostile due to differences that we cannot accept. Rather than trying to gain knowledge and familiarity with them, we demonize them and thus create a wall or separation from them so that their threatening existence can be viewed as a mysterious and dangerous dragon. By this alienation and segregation, however, an illusionary comfort is created in which we manage to settle down and create distance from the threat. For that reason, when settling into a community it is easier to join like-minded individuals with whom we can separate ourselves from the outside, foreign entities that we commonly consider threatening. Collectivity aids us in coping with everyday life. Again, the so called 'membership' creates a link between the individuals and between the groups and the individuals (Breiger, 1974).

Moreover, it is important to note that the individuals who migrate to other territories, despite their seemingly individualistic choice, are usually from collectivist societies, they grow up “among a number of people living closely together, not just their parents and other children, but members of an extended family – grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, and sometimes also neighbors, housemates, co-villagers, and lords or servants. In this situation children learn to think of themselves as part of a “we”-group or in-group, a relationship that is not voluntary but predetermined by birth” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 225). For this reason, we cannot consider them entirely as ‘individualistic’ individuals just because they leave the community behind as they usually keep ties with their home environment. Additionally, this strong connection might also be a reason for the previously mentioned dissatisfaction that they feel in the new environment as they lack the family and friends they have grown up with, and possibly the cultural attributes that they learned during their childhood and adolescence. When moving to a new territory, for example (as the previous scenario showed) from Szerencs to Budapest, or from Catanzaro to Milan, the cultural difference is not very sharp and staggering as it would be with a completely foreign country, but there can still be certain elements or attitudes that are hard to get along with. For this reason, a sense of unease and unfamiliarity can cause home-sickness, loneliness and isolation. This might result in a stronger feeling of turning back to the roots and trying to re-enter the community that they have left behind in search of the familiar community they know well.

Nevertheless, since the individuals who have left their home region remain in close and frequent contact with their home, they visit the family and friends on a regular basis, they spend holidays and other celebrations together, there is always a feeling of safety that they can rely on as the ties are not cut completely and they might feel they have something to fall back on. This might be helpful in proceeding in their everyday lives as they feel that they have an insurance that they can always return to their home region without taking any major risk. However, it can also be an obstacle as they continuously miss what they have left behind and cannot feel entirely settled down in the new environment.

The subjective well-being

The so-called subjective well-being (SWB) which “represents how happy and satisfied we are with the life we are leading” (Schwartz and Sortheix, 2018, p. 1) comes into play here which will help us understand in this context how it influences the individual’s life choices. Schwartz and Sortheix (2018) describe that there are “three universal requirements of human existence:

needs of individuals as biological organisms, requisites of coordinated social interaction, and survival and welfare needs of groups" because of the collectivist nature of humans, "[p]eople cannot cope successfully with these requirements of human existence alone. To cope with them, people must articulate appropriate goals, communicate with others about these goals, and gain cooperation in pursuing them. Values are the socially desirable concepts used to represent and communicate these goals" (p. 2). If the family or friendship ties are strong enough, they can fulfill the role of feedback and validation for our goals and thus create a secure environment for us to operate in. However, in the case of the relocated youth, the source of reassurance is back home and thus an everyday, direct relationship does not exist – they must find other sources of help, too. This might be the previously mentioned establishment of the community in which they gather together to fight the “dragon” (Hankiss, 1977).

If an individual settles down in an environment in which the cultural system and more specifically the values, are in agreement with his own, there seems to be a higher chance for SWB because there are other people who back up the choices of the individual and help him/her practice them (Schwartz and Sortheix, 2018). However, “expressing non-congruent values undermines SWB because others disapprove or even punish” while there is also a third possibility which “refers to internal value conflict, conflict within one’s own value system that may diminish SWB. This happens if values internalized from the environment contradict the values a person already espouses” (Schwartz and Sortheix, 2018, p. 9). In this case a person’s SWB greatly depends on the brought values as they do not allow him to ease into the new environment because a continuous contradiction or tension will be present that makes his/her everyday dealings difficult and unpleasant. For this reason, it can be that these young individuals do not find agreement with the environment they live in or they feel they need to give up certain identity qualities they find important in order to fit in.

The identity

When looking at the life choices and the way the individuals shift between groups, it is important to look at not only their cultural or social toolkit but also the way they construct their identity. So far we have looked at how the person is linked to the groups, how the individualist and collectivistic roles jump back and forth, and how the SWB also affects these relationships. Now, we would like to look at how the identity actually shifts based on the point of view we use and how a person can become an individual and a member of a group (a set of individuals) at the same time.

As previously mentioned, the societies we live in – and the overall society, the whole population itself – is built up of single individuals who are somehow related or correlated to one another. This relationship is the basis of study of many social scientific research (Goffman, 1971; Breiger, 1974) as they aim to describe what roles we obtain, hold and commute between throughout the daily interactions with each other. Goffman (1971) describes such relationships as follows, “In all societies there are "anchored relations" (or "pegged" ones) such that each end identifies the other personally, knows the other does likewise, and openly acknowledges to the other that an irrevocable starting has been made between them-the establishment of a framework of mutual knowing, which retains, organizes, and applies the experience the ends have of one another” (p. 189). In this sense, a community exists in which the individuals share some experiences that tie them together and create a common identity which cannot exist anywhere else but where they have been shared previously. These individuals know each other because of this commonality, and they know what to expect when they get into interaction; however, the same might not apply in the new environment and the previously described conflicts and tensions might arise.

In Breiger’s (1974) study, he defines how through sociometric methods we can establish the way individuals are linked to each other or to groups and how these ties can be quantified. This approach can prove to be useful if we would like to understand how certain social relations change through time. In the case of our research, it would be useful to look at how these ties shift after the individuals have left the regions, and how new ties would be created or old ties would be re-created once they return. By doing so, we would be able to observe the dynamics of the communities and see how also the previously mentioned individualistic features turn back into collectivism as they re-emerge into the community. The question arises in this case: do the individuals who have shown individualistic characteristics shed this identity or they simply return to an identity that has been ‘switched off’ while they were ‘outside’ the community? How would the “social” and “personal identity” (Goffman, 1971) interact with each other? As described by Goffman (1971), “by "social identity," I mean the broad social categories (and the organizations and groups that function like categories) to which an individual can belong and be seen as belonging: age-grade, sex, class, regiment, and so forth. By "personal identity," I mean the unique organic continuity imputed to each individual, established through distinguishing marks such as name and appearance, and elaborated by means of knowledge about his biography and social attributes-knowledge which comes to be organized around his distinguishing marks” (p. 189). In light of this, we could say that the social

identity of the person would not change as those are pre-set characteristics of a person; however, the personal identity would be different once an individual has left his homeland as he would be obtaining new roles, experiences and inputs that would shape himself. As a result, he would be considered as an outsider in the home community once returning because he would not have been sharing the same experiences with those who have stayed, and this way he would become a non-member of the community. Additionally, he would also become a non-member because as we could see through Breiger's (1974) example, one would – besides the shared interests and affinities – need to be an active part of the community in order for him to be a real participant. Here we speak of these actions metaphorically – it can be that an individual is part of a community by attending the book club where he meets like-minded individuals and they create a society together – but in our case we speak of a larger, more abstract group which is the Calabrian community, for example. This way, we define a group that is labelled 'Calabrian' which covers various aspects. It defines their geographical location, their culture (cuisine, language, religion, beliefs, habits etc.), and their basic identity which is determined also by these. When they leave this land, they are still Calabrian, as "In our society there is the curious understanding that once two individuals have been thusly bonded, their relationship can change drastically but never revert to non-acquaintanceship; forgetting another's name or face can be excusable but calls for an excuse" (Goffman, 1971, p. 189).

In view of this, even though they leave the Calabrian community they would always be acquainted with it regardless of their current location and they would know its members as they share a common identity. However, as mentioned above, their identity would become manifold as they would become part of other collectivities which would contribute to their character, too.

Conclusion

This essay was an attempt to understand how individuals are part of communities, how they relate to each other, and how this system of relationships aids the functioning of societies as a whole. By using a case study of a group of individuals it was demonstrated what happens if one gets detached from a community, tries to settle down in a new one, or aims to re-settle in the original environment. The study of Breiger (1974) served as a basis of understanding how individuals and groups are related and how it can be mapped out from a sociometric perspective. An observation was made at Goffman's (1971) depiction of identity and how memberships are formed in a society. Additionally, we observed Hofstede's (2001) descriptions

of individualism and collectivism which aided us in the comprehension of the previous two studies by defining how an individual's life choices might seem individualistic at first glance but later prove to keep his ties to the community through the course of his actions. In addition to this, we have also touched upon the so called subjective well-being of individuals (Schwartz and Sortheix, 2018) and which again direct and shape the social relations one has. We also attempted to unfold how the identity is changing through the journey these individuals take, and how their relationship to the community becomes more complex due to the new experiences.

All in all, the aim was to look at the complexity of societies and their building blocks, the individuals themselves, and how correlations can be made based on their activities, aims, and correspondence. In order to better understand such social processes it will be necessary to continue and deepen the current research by observing more specific cases of individuals from these two regions, and to compare and contrast them for formulating a more holistic picture of the situation.

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