



Community vitality: The concept

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Introduction

In Oxford English Dictionary, vitality is defined as "the state of being strong and active" and "the power giving continuance to life". In this sense anything that is alive contains vitality, but it is also possible to have more vitality, therefore being stronger and more active than that which has less vitality.

Vitality as a concept is found in a variety of contexts, each of which offers different insights. One interesting and relevant definition comes from the field of psychology. "Feeling really "alive" is a familiar yet notably variable aspect of human experience. People regularly speak of being particularly alive or invigorated in certain circumstances or following certain events, whereas in other contexts they can feel "dead" or drained" (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Vitality is, therefore, not an everyday feeling, but is rather a specific experience of possessing enthusiasm and spirit. In psychology, it is a subjective experience defined and identified by the person who experiences it.

Vitality is also associated with autonomy and self-actualization, specifically the degree to which one is free of conflicts, unburdened by external controls and feeling capable of effecting action. Correspondingly, feelings of energy such as jitteriness, anxiety or pressure are negatively related to a sense of vitality. This physical dimension is more evident when basic bodily functions are robust and able to be effectively exercised.

Vitality is also a concept expressed in different cultures. Western society's "subjective vitality" is similar to the Chinese concept of 'Chi', the source of life, creativity, right action, and harmony. In Japan, the concept of 'Ki' similarly entails energy and power on which one can draw. As well, it relates to physical, mental, and spiritual health. Balinese healers attempt to mobilize 'bayu', a vital spiritual or life force that varies among individuals, and represents what is needed to live, grow, and resist illness.

In neuro-biology, cognitive vitality refers to the brain's ability to adapt and learn (Fillit et al., 2002). Cognitive decline, the opposite of cognitive vitality often, but not inevitably, occurs with

aging. Those adults with greater stores of knowledge may in fact show increased adaptivity as do older people who are socially interactive and use additional information resources in solving everyday problems. Cognitive vitality can also be enhanced through training.

Vitality refers, in ecology, to the success of an organism in translating nutrients or other inputs into growth. The word appears in numerous papers (for example, Aario et al., 2001; Šantrůček, Svobodová, & Hlavičková, 2003) describing the ability of an organism to survive in the context of its environment.

Vitality is also used to help understand the strength of communities within communities. Ethnolinguistic vitality, for example, is "that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and collective entity within the intergroup setting" (Harwood, Giles, & Bourhis, 1994). The more vitality a community has, the more likely it will survive and thrive. Three structural variables influence vitality; these are demography, institutional support, and status factors. Demographic variables refer to the population size of the community and its distribution. Institutional control factors refer to the extent that the community has gained formal and informal representation in the various institutions of a community, region, state or nation and the degree to which the group has organized to shape its own destiny. Status factors refer to a community's social prestige, its socio-historical status and the prestige of its language and culture. The subjective vitality questionnaire (SVQ) is used to evaluate ethnolinguistic vitality.

Key themes characterizing vitality which emerge from this diverse literature include:

- (from psychology) vitality is not the everyday but rather an episodic specialness, a peak experience available to everyone yet not necessarily experienced by everyone;
- (from ecology) vitality is interdependent on its environs;
- (from ethnolinguistics) vitality includes an aspect of autonomy or self-actualization allowing the expression of one's nature; and
- (from other cultures) vitality has all of the dimensions of the life form which expresses it—in humans this includes physical, emotional, social and intellectual aspects.

Community Vitality Defined

Definitions of community vitality are primarily found in reports published by a variety of organizations, but there is no train of journal articles tracing the development of the idea.

The idea of a competent community is identified as a precursor to community vitality, emphasizing the importance of developing and possessing a collective capacity to solve problems. Competent communities collaborate and work effectively in identifying the problems and needs of the community, achieve a working consensus on goals and priorities, agree on ways and means to implement the agreed-upon goals and priorities and collaborate effectively in the required actions (Grigsby, 2001).

Oppressed and non-dominant communities have often been described as lacking in competence, in many instances because the natural support systems that existed in these communities were removed through oppression. However, oppressed groups are frequently evaluated against their oppressor's terms and seldom against their own criteria (Sonn & Fisher, 1998).

Dale and Newman (2010) considered the conditions that enable and encourage communities to collectively address sustainable development challenges, drawing on case studies from thirty-five communities across Canada. (Dale, Ling, & Newman, 2010) These conditions include the following:

- community openness and trust (partnerships between traditionally adversarial sectors of the community can foster innovation and creativity);
- connection with people and place (the deeper the connection between people and a location, the more profound an influence that place has);
- continuity and stability (stable funding and leadership enables a community to develop and implement a vision);
- perturbation (change stimulates innovation and creativity leading to community action, however it is a balance. Too little change leads to stagnation and too much to instability).

Other definitions range from expressing community vitality as the nature and quality of people and places around you (Scott, 2009a), to a report prepared for the [Institute of Well-Being](#).

Vital communities are characterized by strong, active and inclusive relationships between residents, private sector, public sector and civil society organizations that work to foster individual and collective wellbeing. Vital communities are those that are able to cultivate and marshal these relationships in order to create, adapt and thrive in the changing world and thus improve well-being of citizens (Scott, 2009b).

The Institute of Well-Being paper develops a conceptual model for community vitality and assigns eleven indicators to it including participation in group activities, volunteering, number of close relatives, providing assistance to others, property crime, violent crime, walking alone after dark, trust, experience of discrimination, caring for others and belonging to community.

The vagueness of the definition means that it is difficult at a conceptual level to distinguish vitality from other concepts such as sustainable development, community resilience, vibrant communities, healthy communities and others (Grigsby, 2001). Community resilience is a reactive concept, defined in one case as, a positive trajectory of adaptation after a disturbance, stress or adversity (Norris & Stevens, 2007). We propose that the degree of community vitality determines the degree of community resilience in the face of an endogenous or internal shock. Norris and Stevens propose that community resilience is determined by economic development, communication systems, social capital and community competence, characteristics that are a subset of community vitality. This distinction means that community vitality refers to the condition of the community in the absence of dramatic change, in effect the everyday condition of the community.

In particular, it is difficult to distinguish community vitality from community well-being. There is an extensive and broad body of literature on community wellbeing and very little on community vitality. Society has traditionally measured progress through economic indicators such as GDP, employment rates and others. However, at this point there is considerable debate as to whether economic progress in all cases is a means to the end of wellbeing (Jackson, 2009).

One branch of the well-being analysis has focused on happiness and notably the definition of happiness overlaps with the idea of vitality as used in psychology. A non-trivial definition (Abdallah, Thompson, Michaelson, Marks, & Steuer, 2009):

being 'happy' is more than just having a smile on your face – we use the term subjective well-being to capture its complexity. Aside from feeling 'good', it also incorporates a sense of individual vitality, opportunities to undertake meaningful, engaging activities which confer feelings of competence and autonomy, and the possession of a stock of inner resources that helps one cope when things go wrong. Well-being is also about feelings of relatedness to other people – both in terms of close relationships with friends and family, and belonging to a wider community."

The [new economics foundation](#) has constructed what it calls the "Happy Planet Index" based on this definition of happiness. The Index varies from traditional assessments of well-being by incorporating ecological carrying capacity into its calculations (Ibid).

Importantly, reported life satisfaction also correlates with all the complex aspects of well-being described earlier, such as feeling autonomous and being resilient. This is the 'sustainable' aspect of sustainable well-being. No moral framework would accept high well-being if it was at the expense of others living today and/or future generations."

In our review of the literature, there was no reference to ecological carrying capacity in the context of vitality with one exception. Flora et al. (2001) offer a community-generated view of vitality that includes the following:

1. increased use of the skills, knowledge and ability of local people;
2. strengthened relationships and communication;
3. improved community initiative, responsibility and adaptability;
4. sustainable, healthy ecosystems with multiple community benefits, and
5. appropriately diverse and healthy economies.

In summary, while there is literature in different fields on vitality, the concept of community vitality is generally vague with various organizations attempting to define and claim it, often without a strong theoretical basis. Its breadth, a weakness as a definition, is a strength as a concept in that it brings together a disparate set of ideas and concepts that are deeply relevant to any attempt to influence a community's development or to change its development pathway (Burch, in press).

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