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Wendy L. Smoker

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

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The Formation of Riggtown: A Sociological Approach To Understanding Community Relationships

by Wendy L. Smoker, HIS480 (submitted April 16, 1997)

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Although it is impossible to determine the precise reasons surrounding the formation of close relationships between people, many sociological principles dealing with groups and group relations can provide insight into their foundations. According to John J. Macionis, author of *Society: The Basics*, "Virtually everyone moves through life with a sense of belonging based on group membership." (104) People seek out others and form groups to satisfy a need to feel involved or to belong to something. The resulting groups represent different levels of attachment between members and can be divided into primary and secondary social groups. Typically a primary social group consists of members of a family or close personal friends. However occasionally a larger group, consisting of members who are not necessarily family, develop very close relationships and may be considered a primary social group. This is perhaps the case with Riggtown, an area of West Chester, Pennsylvania, that became an extremely important part of the lives of those who lived there. People living in Riggtown shared several characteristics which may have served as a catalyst to the formation of such a close-knit community. These shared characteristics included income level, ethnicity and religion. The geography itself of Riggtown may even have had a significant impact on the relationships between individuals who resided there. Research has also shown that once a social group is established, the behavior of members is often affected or driven by the general attitudes of the group (Gerow, 484). Therefore it could be argued that once relationships were established between residents of Riggtown, the general attitudes of the group affected the behavior of its members, drawing them even closer.

In order to understand the basis of the relationships among residents of Riggtown, it is necessary to define the difference between a primary social groups and a secondary social group. John J. Macionis expresses the ideas

of sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley, when he says, "a primary social group is a small social group in which relationships are personal and enduring. Bound together by strong and lasting loyalties..." (104). An individual's immediate family is perhaps the most accurate example of a primary social group based on the expectations placed on family members. Macionis explains that members of primary social groups are dependent on one another, however they do not base their membership in the family on what they hope to receive. He says, "Rather, family and friendship groups commonly are composed of people who feel that they belong together. Put otherwise, members see a primary group as an end in itself rather than as a means to other ends" (105). Primary social groups play an important role in constructing the attitudes and values of their members. For instance, the values instilled in a child by his parents, often remain in place for years to come. Macionis describes the interaction of members of a primary group when he says, "People in primary social groups share activities, spend time together, and know each other well. They have concern for each other's well-being. - The family is the most important primary group" (105). He also goes further by saying that primary groups help to shape attitudes because they provide comfort and security (105). Since relationships in primary social groups are not goal oriented, members are more able to relax and take other members as they are.

"Secondary social groups are almost the opposite of primary social groups. They consist of an impersonal social group based on a specific interest or activity" (Macionis, 105). Some examples of secondary social groups would include, co-workers, individuals who attend the same church, or members of a club or association such as boy scouts. Social groups such as these, that are not considered primary, do not maintain a strong attachment between members, and are generally goal oriented. Macionis clarifies the goal orientation of secondary social groups when he says, "primary group members define each other according to who they are, those in secondary groups look to one another for what they are, that is, what others can do for them. In secondary groups, we tend to keep score, mindful of what we receive in return" (105). Co-workers may have a superficial relationship with each other in order to maintain a suitable working environment. However, even though such a relationship could eventually transform into one of a primary orientation, generally they remain in the secondary category.

There is a third type of group that may not even be considered a social group, but a group that serves to place individuals into categories. This type of group is termed an "aggregate." People who are members of an aggregate have

some characteristic in common such as "homeowner" or "mother", but they do not necessarily interact with each other (Macionis, 104). For example, people who are riding on a certain subway at a certain time could be considered an aggregate since they have a common characteristic (they're all riding the same subway at the same time). However it is possible, and in fact probable, that these individuals will not interact with each other. Therefore they cannot be considered members of a social group. It is important to recognize an aggregate as a group since circumstances, in some cases, can lead to the transformation of the group from an aggregate to a secondary or even primary social group. This transformation occurs when members of an aggregate develop some other common characteristic. For example, passengers on a subway together could form a social group if they gained a common identity and a reason to interact. Macionis uses the example of a subway crash in New York when passengers were forced to interact and work together to survive (104)

The name Riggstown refers to a subdivision of West Chester, Pennsylvania, that from the time period approximately 1889 to 1960, could be described as an extremely close-knit community. The relationships between residents of Riggstown during this time were so strong that the community could have been considered a primary social group. Dr. James A. Jones, professor at West Chester University, outlines the geography of Riggstown as "the area on the east side of town [West Chester] between the railroad tracks and Goose Creek" (Jones, 62). Riggstown could have been originally classified as an aggregate, or a group of people sharing a certain characteristic (living in Riggstown) but lacking interaction. However, individuals of Riggstown did interact quite often and developed into a social group. The social group Riggstown defined, surpassed the definition of a secondary group as the relationships of its members became stronger and less goal oriented. Riggstown became a primary social group, consisting of individuals who viewed others around them as family, not merely neighbors. Residents of Riggstown thought of their neighborhood as separate from the rest of West Chester. As long time resident, Martha Gertrude Stanley, says, "Riggstown was known as a bad part of town. The kids from Riggstown wouldn't let any other kids across the Goose Creek bridge into their neighborhood" (Stanley and Gincley interview). One resident of Riggstown felt so strongly about his neighborhood that he had Riggstown tattooed onto his arm upon entering the service. When asked why he said that he did it because Riggstown was one of the most important things to him (Charles Carey and Nancy Carey interview) Dorthea Parker, who grew up in Riggstown also considered Riggstown a very important part of her life and explains that she still keeps in contact with many

of the people who were her neighbors and friends (Dorthea Parker Interview). It would seem that Riggstown fits Macionis definition of a primary social group made up of relationships that are enduring.

It is interesting to question why Riggstown was so very different from many other communities where relationships are impersonal and goal oriented. When asked why she felt Riggstown was so special, Dorthea Parker, who grew up in Riggstown, simply replied, "they all got along" (Dorthea Parker Interview). Perhaps the residents of Riggstown have no idea why their community was and is so special to them. Maybe it is not important for them to understand why, since their relationships with each other are already deeply established. Sociologist, Emile Durkheim explains the subconscious nature of an individual's relationship development by saying, "People can work together not because they rationally decide there are benefits from doing so, but because they have a feeling they can trust others to live up to agreements... People do not have to think about these things and that is what makes society possible." (Collins, 151) However, Durkheim was not saying that there are no circumstances which contribute to the formation of relationships, but merely that they are often unknown by the individuals involved. Therefore, by taking a sociological approach when viewing the facts and tales of Riggstown, one can outline some of the characteristics which possibly made it so unique.

One obvious factor which almost certainly contributed to the cohesiveness of Riggstown was the fact that many of the residents were related to one another. In remembering that the family is generally the most important, primary social group in an individual's life, it is easy to understand why the relationships in Riggstown were also so important. When asked whether it would be fair to say that more people in Riggstown were related to each other, resident Martha Stanley replied, "the Davises and Townsends were related, and the Smileys were related. Hamiltons were related. They were all related" (Stanley/Gincley interview). With so many residents networked together by actual family relations, the community had become one giant extended family. As another resident, Dorthea Parker, pointed out, even when family members left Riggstown and moved away, their visits home were frequent. She says, "And then on Sundays, if the families had moved away or something, or some of the relatives daughters and sons, they would come home for Sunday dinner. They were very family oriented" (Dorthea Parker Interview). It is this family orientation of the people and the relationships of Riggstown that classified it as a primary social group made it so important to its members.

Another characteristic which residents of Riggstown had in common was income level. The area did not happen to be one of the wealthiest in West

Chester. In fact Riggstown came into existence when West Chester was expanding as a location for low income housing, as Dorthea Parker explains. When asked about the financial status of people in Riggstown, resident Martha Stanley replied, "It was pretty poor. We were poor." Riggstown was also right next to Goose Creek which happened to be the sewer for that side of West Chester. According to the Daily Local News, "Goose Creek is one of the filthiest streams that flow near West Chester. Nearly all the sewage of the town flows into it, and, besides, a number of water closets sit over it." In other words one could say that the living conditions in Riggstown would not make it a desirable place to live unless lack of finances was an issue. John J. Macionis makes the point that relationships are generally stronger and more primary in nature, in preindustrial societies. He says, "Primary relationships dominate in preindustrial societies. Secondary relationships dominate in modern, industrial societies, where people are more mobile and have more specialized roles" (105-106). Perhaps his theory could be applied to poor areas of industrial societies as well, since people in these areas tend to be less mobile and assume less specialized roles.

The lack of mobility of members of a community and the geography of the area itself go hand in hand when it comes to community relationships. Riggstown is physically separated from the rest of West Chester by Goose Creek and the railroad tracks. Residents of Riggstown are able to clearly define the boundaries of their community in this way. At one point, when asked to compare Riggstown to West Chester, Dorthea Parker says, "I really don't know because Riggstown was my area, so I really don't know." She explained that they did not have the methods of transportation necessary to socialize much outside their own neighborhood. Psychologist, Robert Zajonc explains the effects of lack of mobility in a more scientific way when he developed the idea of the "mere exposure phenomenon." which says, "The more exposure you have to a stimuli, the more you will begin to like it" (Gerow, 482). Gerow, Brothen & Newell, authors of Fundamentals of Psychology, also believe that physical proximity tends to make people like each other. They explain "Sociologists, as well as your own personal experience, will tell you that people tend to establish friendships (and romances) with others with whom they have grown up, worked, or gone to school" (482). These ideas can easily be generalized to Riggstown since their lack of mobility forced them to spend more time with each other.

In addition to the fact that the people of Riggstown were often related to each other, lived together, and shared the same financial status, it appears that they also had other things in common. For example it has been stated that

most of the residents of Riggstown shared the same ethnicity. Dorthea Parker says, "Some of them were related. And then others, well it was mostly all Irish down that end of town when I was growing up." She names some of the Irish families of Riggstown such as the, Finegans, Doughertys, Hamiltons and Townsends. It seems that the people in Riggstown had several things in common which may have served to make them closer. Gerow, Brothen and Newell emphasize this idea when they say, "there is a very positive relationship between liking and the proportion of attitudes held in common. To put it simply, the more similar another person is to you, the more you will tend to like that person" (483). With this explanation it is quite clear why so many people living in Riggstown felt so strongly about their neighbors.

Yet another aspect of life in Riggstown may have contributed to the cohesiveness of the community, and this aspect is religion. Although not every resident of Riggstown belonged to the same church or practiced the same religion, many of them were Catholic. When asked to comment on religion in Riggstown, Dorthea Parker replied, "Mostly everyone else [not the Carey family] was Catholic." It is very interesting to consider the possibilities for interaction between members of a group of individuals who have many common characteristics, but also practice the same religion. It is even more interesting since the religion in the case of Riggstown happens to be Catholic since it is in itself, very unifying. As Roger S. Ahlbrandt says in his book entitled, *Neighborhoods, People and Community*, "The strongest communal bonds exist within white, Catholic neighborhoods. Residents have the strongest primary ties there; they are more attached to their neighborhoods..." (Ahlbrandt, 179). The reasons behind the unity of the Catholic church are described in Leo Rosten's book entitled, *Religions of America*, which outlines the difference between the Catholic faith and the Protestant faith. He labels the interpretation of the bible as the primary cause for difference since Protestants believe in a private interpretation and Catholics believe in an interpretation solely by the church (the Roman Catholic Church) (Rosten, 41) This essentially means that members of ten Protestant churches could all have different beliefs in reference to an issue whereas Catholics from ten different churches would more than likely have the same beliefs.

Once a close-knit, cohesive community has been established of members with several common characteristics, their perception of the community itself also becomes very important in determining the nature of their attachment to it. When people see their community or group as different or separate, they often begin to assign symbols or labels to it. Joseph R. Gusfield comments on "Consciousness of Kind", a theory originally coined from Franklin Giddings in

his work entitled, *Studies in the Theory of Human Society*. Gusfield explains this theory by saying, "People separate the group they're in by giving identifying symbols to the group, such as a special name" (Gusfield, 33). The people of Riggstown saw themselves as being different and separate from the remainder of West Chester and therefore gave the area an identifying name. When asked whether she would have called the area in which she lived Riggstown, Dorthea Parker replied, "Well that's what it was called, just like uptown, they call that the North end of town so the Southeastern end was Riggstown." The name itself served to further separate the community from the remainder of West Chester in the eyes of the residents of Riggstown and those outside it.

It seems that residents of Riggstown had a great deal of pride in their community and still feel strong attachments to those who lived around them. When a meeting was held at the Chester County historical society with all the Riggtowners, Dorthea Parker commented that she was very surprised at the amount of people that came. She said, "And a lot of people who lived on Matlack Street, maybe a little farther, they consider themselves Riggtowners, and they came back." When you are considering a neighborhood made up of low income housing and people who were definitely not as well off as those in other areas of town, it is interesting that so many people had so much pride in Riggstown. However, there are some possible reasons behind this attitude as well, which has been researched by several sociologists. Joseph R. Gusfield explains that often the size and situation of a community will determine the amount of pride and attachment its residents will feel. He says, "One of the prevalent images of contemporary social science is of the small town, the village, the farm settlement as the embodiment of lost virtues..." (87). Gusfield also makes the point that "Smaller communities are often seen as superior to cities which are termed to be inhumane. The decline of smaller communities marks a decline in human relationships" (Gusfield, 33). The small community with members who are perhaps more disadvantaged than others, perhaps see themselves as the underdogs. Since they are forced to work harder to survive, they therefore have a lot more pride in their accomplishments.

It has already been shown that the development and characteristics of Riggstown are in line with what "Group Dynamics" suggests about cohesiveness in communities. For example, Sociologist G. William Domhoff says the following concerning group cohesiveness: (1-96)

1. "Physical Proximity is likely to lead to group solidarity"
2. "The more people interact, the more they will be like each other"

3. "Members of socially cohesive groups are more open to the opinions of other members, and are more likely to change their views to those of fellow members."

The third point that Domhoff makes, changing the opinions of members of a group, brings up the question of the significance of group conformity among members of cohesive groups. Were the residents of Riggstown essentially making their community even closer by changing their opinions to match those of others? Sociological and psychological research suggests that this may have been the case.

When placed in a group of others an individual is more likely to relinquish their own beliefs in order to embrace the ideas of the group. In 1952, Sociologist Solomon Asch conducted an experiment in which he grouped individuals together allegedly to study visual perception. All but one member of the group was aware of his experiment and when asked to study various lines drawn on cards to see if they were the same in length, these individuals intentionally gave the wrong answers to test the conformity of the remaining one. He found that in more than one-third of the cases, the person who was not aware of the experiment also gave the wrong answers in order to conform to the group (Macionis, 108). This was an experiment in determining how group acceptance affects individual behavior. The residents of Riggstown had many things in common with each other and when interaction took place among them, it would be natural for them to adjust their beliefs to match the beliefs of others, since the community was so unified. Acceptance by others was very important and in this way the community guided the behavior of its members.

Coupled with the idea of group conformity, a social group will establish norms for member behavior which, in a cohesive group, members closely adhere to. Psychologist Muzafer Sherif conducted an experiment in group conformity and the formation of social norms using people seated in a darkened room. A light was projected onto the wall and an autokinetic effect was seen (the light appeared to move even though it had not). When people were asked to judge how far it had moved they tried to match what others said by adjusting their original judgment. "As a result of the group experience, each participant adjusted his or her judgments to match the estimates of others...A norm had emerged to guide behavior in this ambiguous situation, and the individuals in the study conformed to that norm" (Gerow, 485). Perhaps since the residents of Riggstown held such a strong attachment for their friends and neighbors, norms established by the community were closely adhered to. If this was the case then the community could be said to have perpetuated itself and increased its strength, solely through the behavior of individual residents. The

behavior is the responsibility of the individual but is often guided by the attitudes of the group.

The idea of group conformity and formation of societal norms leads to a third concept, that of shared tradition. People who have had a common past experience or common traditions are more likely to have close relationships than people who do not share common past experiences. However, those who are members of cohesive social groups, who do not necessarily share a history, will develop a common history and tradition through group conformity and norms. This means that people will see their history through the ideas and attitudes of the group, as though it was a shared experience. As Joseph R. Gusfield says, "A homogeneous culture has often been posited as the mark of community. Language, moralities and common histories are expected to produce a sense of being a unique and different people" (87). Also events will serve to create a common history and an excellent example of this is the Goose Creek fire in Riggstown. Almost every resident in Riggstown will have heard about or remember the newspaper article that read "Flames Leap Hundred Feet Into Air When Giant Asphalt Tanks Are Engulfed in Fire at Service Company in Southeastern End of Borough..." (*Daily Local News* (September 12, 1931). Even though the fire was not, by any means, a positive experience, residents of Riggstown like to talk about it since it is a shared experience. It served to give their community a sense of identity separate from the rest of West Chester.

The residents of Riggstown loved and cherished their neighborhood for many reasons, some of which no one may ever understand. However, using principles of sociology, theories can be developed about what led to the cohesiveness of this community. The work of several sociologists such as John J. Macionis, James Henslin, and even Solomon Asch, explains that there are many reasons why people feel more comfortable with certain other people. Some of these reasons include physical proximity and exposure, shared characteristics, and the principles of group conformity. If certain people spend almost all of their time together, they will generally become closer to one another. Also, the more two people have in common, the more comfortable they will be with each other. Also, the closer the group, the more control is exercised over the behavior of individual members. John J. Macionis also explains how social groups can be divided into the categories of primary and secondary, with Riggstown being an example of the primary type where relationships are loyal and long lasting. Riggstown was a very special place to many people, and the truth surrounding its mystery, although it may never be

completely explained, gives way to a thousand more questions and a fascinating topic to explore.

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