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# **Scenarios for the Future: The Real Meaning of Research and the Trends**

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the relationship between individuals' lives  
and their communities

\*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to  
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Services.**

We're just embarking on a research project with the snappy title "A knowledge base to model the relationship between individual's lives and their communities".

I trained as a sociologist, and we have classes in jargon so that we can make everything seem more complex than it really is.

Unfortunately, there will be a little bit of jargon in what follows, because I want to tell you a little bit about our project, which is actually quite complex. There's quite a lot to the program, and I have to convince you that we do have a handle on what a solution might look like.

In this project our collaborators are Our Community, the Municipal Association of Victoria, and Deakin University. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council 2005-2007 – underfunded, actually, but we've got a long history of doing reasonable research on a shoestring.

We have a number of aims. Our first aim is to model the impact of community on residents' lives. Obviously, we need to discuss what a community is. We see three types of 'community --

- Communities of place (geographical communities)
- Communities of interest (voluntary associations)
- Personal communities (networks of significant others).

The idea underlying our approach is that there is a sense in which there is a potential fit between a certain type of person and a certain type of community.

Our first aim, then, to model the impact of community on residents' lives, translates in my analogy as asking how different ecological niches, different collections of resources, affect people.

We're talking in terms of communities of place, communities of interest, and personal communities.

The first two are reasonably clear; 'personal communities' is a relatively new name for an old idea, arising out of the fact that we now live in a much more mobile and geographically dispersed society in which traditional networks tend not to be as tied to place.

We have relatives, for instance, in different parts of the country, or we have friends we never see but whom we talk to regularly on our mobile phones. These are all people that matter to us, that are significant to us, people whose views we listen to when we're deciding on our own views of things.

And so our second aim is to investigate how levels of social connectedness affect community functioning. This second aim is about the fundamental nature of the community as a set of networks, a set of relationships, in which people are more socially integrates or more socially isolated.

And we assume – though there's no real evidence for this – that it's when you get dense social connectedness that you get improved social functioning, that communities work better on the basis of the existence of close relationships between community members.

The project is also trying to achieve four specific outcomes. I'm afraid they're all fairly boring: research projects always start life as grant applications, and it's very difficult to get the Powerpoint out of them afterwards.

[Describing the Model]

That's why we academics live in our ivory towers – to put together models that show how it all works.

We're trying to look at the interactions between a range of individuals and a range of communities, looking at what effect matching and mismatching have, and what we want to end up with is a set of equations that if you feed in the right data will produce predictions of how happy someone is going to be in this or that community.

So our first specific objective is to build a model of how community environment, community processes and individual characteristics and processes affect levels of social capital.

Knowledge base (a database of community, neighbourhood and individual level indicators) to provide evidence relevant to policy relevant to community development and capacity building.

As I've said, we see all this operating at two levels – the levels of the community and the individual. Within each of those levels, there are two things we think matter. At the community level, we look at community structure and community capital. At the individual level, we look at life situation and life-world.

Community structure, in turn, is made up of the 'organisational community' -- the mix of organisations that is located in or significantly affecting the community – and the community's demographic structure – that is, the makeup of the community by, for example, age, gender, occupational distribution, and household composition, the things that give a community its demographic character.

Community capital is made up of a number of things. Social capital, which you know all about, is the prevalence and density of the networks and norms that contribute to collective efficacy and levels of confidence in local authority structures and institutions.

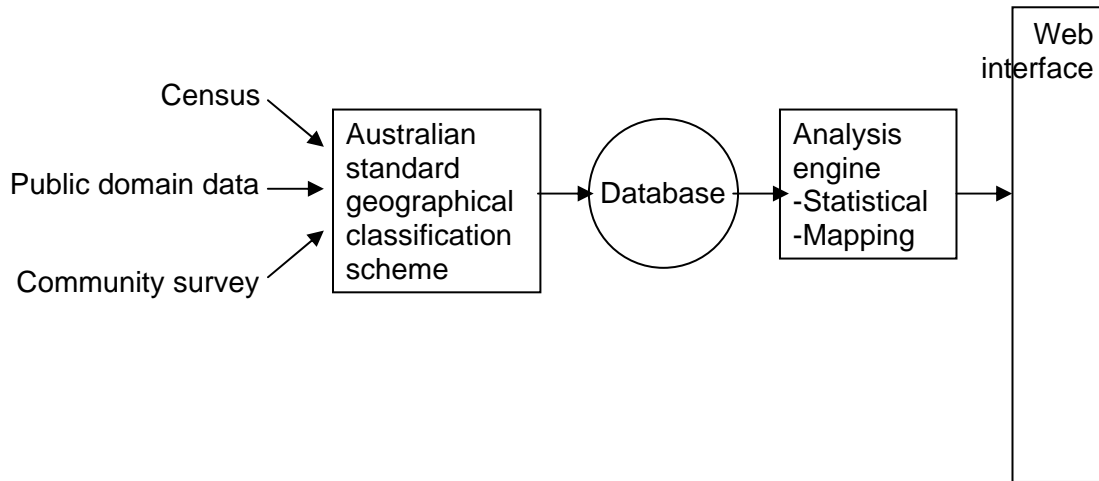
Physical assets are the industrial and commercial infrastructure -- the economic capital invested within the community. There's the cultural heritage of the community and its social history, where we have to look at what's changing, and then there's the natural environment and geographical features.

At the individual level, we have an individual's life situation, which covers things like a person's stage in the life-cycle, their social status, their social roles, and their access to friends, neighbours and family members.

However, people don't deal directly with the real world; they have ideas about it, and they do the things that they do on the basis of these ideas. So we have to look at their life-world -- the motivations, values preferences and beliefs that shape the way we interpret the world.

Taking all this into account, what we are trying to do is set out in this diagram:

# Knowledge base



What we want to do is to relate differences in individuals to differences in communities.

We will input census data, public domain data, and some surveys of our own. We've done some preliminary work on the census data, taking 1996 as a benchmark.

Public domain data is, given the restricted scale of our funding, any data we can get for free; Melways, for example, which allows us to establish any person's relationships with the fixed services of their geographical area - schools, for example, shops, milkbars and clinics.

We can collect crime data, too, by geographical unit.

And we'll also carry out a series of community surveys using a geographically based sampling system. We know that counting and measuring can distort the picture, so we need to find out perceptions – for example, we need to know how people see their neighbourhood, which means that we have to find out what they think of as a neighbourhood.

The Bureau of Statistics has a definition of 'neighbourhood', but that's not necessarily how the people who live there perceive it.

My neighbourhood may be only a few blocks wide, yours might be a street.

When people talk about community involvement we have to find out what they mean by it, what they think about it, and what they do about it.

All this data will then be coded to the Australian standard geographical classification scheme and stored in the database – a data warehouse that can produce information aimed at matching what stakeholders need with the information available.

This is an ongoing project, by the way – so if you don't behave, I'll come back next year.