



## Psychological Sense of Community: Contributions Toward a New Understanding

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### Abstract

*To expand and broaden the conceptualization of community, we advance a psychological notion of community, as a feeling of belonging and connection with a group of people who have shared concerns, and contrast it with community defined in physical terms (i.e., a specific place or geographic location with clear physical boundaries). Results of the present study provide evidence that physical and psychological forms of community are distinct constructs and have differential links to social action.*

### Psychological Sense of Community: Contributions Toward a New Understanding

Volunteerism and other prosocial actions are becoming increasingly common in everyday life. From locally-based initiatives to international organizations such as the Peace Corps, people are devoting more time to benefit others. Much research has examined what motivates individuals to engage in prosocial action; however, little work has probed the important role of community in promoting behavior that enhances society. A notion of benefit to a larger community is implicit in prosocial action and may prove critical for linking desire with action. To the extent that people identify highly with their community and believe that their prosocial efforts will be beneficial, they will likely engage in actions that benefit others and society.

Current and past research has examined psychological sense of community, a feeling of belonging to and dependence on a larger community. However, community has often been defined by physical or geographical boundaries (i.e., as a specific place or geographic location). To expand and broaden the conceptualization of community, we advance a psychological notion of community, as a feeling of belonging and connection with a group of people who have shared concerns.

### Notions of Community

*Place attachment.* Commonly discussed in the environmental psychology literature, place attachment refers to the connection that people often

feel to a place that, for them, elicits an emotion; for example, the place where someone was born, or where he/she now lives and works (Knez, 2005). Involved in the development and conceptualization of place attachment is a dynamic interplay between emotions, beliefs, and action (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005). Current research in environmental psychology has studied place attachment as it relates to a particular climate or environment (Knez, 2005), to recreational settings (Kyle et al., 2005; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004), and to sacred places and religion (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004).

These studies, and the concept of place attachment itself, reference a specific location or geographic entity. Likewise, notions of physical community involve a particular geographic location with clear physical boundaries, such as a neighborhood, town, or city. Kyle, Graefe, & Manning (2005) and Hay (1998), however, suggest that place attachment may include another critical element. In their examination of attachment to the Appalachian Trail, Kyle and colleagues (2005) conclude that the social-bonding and meaningful social relationships that occur in specific settings are an important component of human-place connection. Hay (1998) also found that social ties were influential in determining the strength of his participants' attachment to their rural New Zealand community. Thus, feelings of connection to others in the community appear to be influential in determining the degree to which individuals feel attached to a particular geographic region.

*Psychological sense of community.* A feeling of connectedness with others may also form the basis for a broader sense of community. Over the last two decades, community psychology has been interested in community identity and the related *psychological sense of community* (Colombo & Senatore, 2005), a concept first introduced by Sarason (1974). Broadly defined, *psychological sense of community* refers to a feeling of belonging and being able to depend on a larger community. In the literature, it is commonly thought of as including four components: 1) a sense of membership and belonging, 2) a feeling that an individual makes a difference in the community and that the community is important to its members, 3) a sense that the community can meet the needs of its members, and 4) the presence of a shared emotional connection among members, that they will share experiences and a history together (Colombo, Mosso, & De Piccoli, 2001; Kim & Kaplan, 2004; Peterson, Speer, & Hughey, 2006; Prezza & Costantini, 1998; Proescholdbell, Roosa, & Nemeroff, 2006; Puddifoot, 2003).

Psychological sense of community has been explored in numerous studies, some conducted in the U.S. and some internationally (Bishop, Colquhoun, & Johnson, 2006; Hill, 1996; Kim & Kaplan, 2004; Puddifoot, 2003; Tartaglia, 2006), and has been linked to life satisfaction (Prezza & Costantini, 1998), social identification (Obst & White, 2005), personality traits (Lounsbury, Loveland, & Gibson, 2003), positive and negative outcomes of youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Cantillona, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003), and the presence of threats to communities (Loomis, Dockett, & Brodsky, 2004).

#### *Issues of Conceptualization*

The notion that a psychological sense of community exists and that it has wide ranging influences is not in doubt. Rather, what current literature must now address is how to broaden the conceptualization that underlies psychological sense of community. Many studies examining community approach psychological sense of community as a geographically-bounded construct, such as connected to a neighborhood or town. Even the most commonly used measure to assess psychological sense of community, the Sense of Community Index (SCI; Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Chavis, 1990) includes items that reference physical space (e.g., “Very few of my neighbors know me”; “I expect to live on this block a long time”; “My neighbors and I want the same

things from the block”; and “If there is a problem on this block people who live here can get it solved.”).

While some researchers (e.g., Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Puddifoot, 2003; Tartaglia, 2006) do advance an expanded notion of psychological sense of community, more work needs to be done. Their assessments still involve the idea that community is a geographically-defined region such as a block or neighborhood. Largely absent is the notion that sense of community involves feelings of psychological connectedness with other people who share similar attitudes, values, or experiences, and who may not be in the same physical location.

Omoto and Malsch (2005) and Omoto and Snyder (2002) echo similar sentiments. They conclude that most literature views community as context, as having and being defined by boundaries. Research should instead focus on community as process, shifting community sentiment to a wholly psychological conceptualization and not referring to a geographically-bounded region (Omoto & Malsch, 2005; Omoto & Snyder, 2002).

Based on this theorizing, we developed two working definitions of community. A physical notion of community was defined as a specific place or geographic location with clear physical boundaries. A psychological notion of community was defined as a feeling of belonging and connection with a group of people who have shared concerns. In the present study we examine these two conceptions of community and their involvement in pro-social action.

#### **Methods**

##### *Participants*

A total of 111 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern U.S. university participated. A majority was female (68.9%, males: 28.3%). Participants ranged in age from 18 (20.0%) to 20 (23.8%).

##### *Procedure*

Participants completed an online survey where they were asked to define community (“When you see or hear the word community, what do you think of?”), to list the communities to which they belonged, and to indicate their interest and likelihood of participating in various volunteer activities.

##### *Measures*

*Community appeals.* To examine whether differing notions of community may influence participants’

interest in volunteer activities, two message appeals were created. One emphasized a physical sense of community, and one a psychological sense of community. Both appeals began with the stem: “We need your help! The Clean-Sweep Society is looking for volunteers to help clean up the alleys around the city. This is a one-time volunteer activity of only three hours on a Saturday afternoon.” The physical appeal ended with: “Please join us – It’s a great way to clean-up and beautify the area!” The psychological appeal ended with: “Please join us – It’s a great way to connect with people who are also concerned with the environment and be successful in achieving a common goal!” Participants were randomly assigned to three conditions: 1) no appeal, 2) appeal emphasizing a physical sense of community, 3) appeal emphasizing a psychological sense of community.

*Volunteer activities.* Ten items ( $\alpha = .88$ ) assessed participants’ interest in participating in volunteer activities to enhance physical community (e.g., raking leaves on your block) and twenty-two items ( $\alpha = .94$ ) assessed interest in activities that enhance psychological community (e.g., tutoring children). Participants rated their interest in each activity using a 7-point scale ranging from 1(not at all interested) to 7(very interested). Items of each type (physical and psychological) were combined to form scales and a mean calculated.

## Results

### *Views of Community*

In participants’ open-ended responses, there was evidence that they thought of community in both physical and psychological terms. One participant was clearly physically minded: “I would think of community as an area of town that I live in, the neighbors, stores, restaurants, and the people that I see ... also the parks and other green space that is a part of it.” Another participant conceptualized community in terms of interpersonal relationships:

I think of a community as a group of people who spend a lot of time together sharing ideas and working together to build productive relationships. This group of people probably also works together to better the area that they live in, such as doing clean-up activities, fundraisers, and food drives.

Yet another participant viewed community in wholly psychological terms: “Community means more to me as referring to people rather than place. A community can exist beyond geographical borders as long as people share something in common.”

On average, participants listed approximately seven communities to which they belonged ( $M = 7.30$ ,  $SD = 4.48$ ). Physical communities ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ ) seemed to be slightly more salient than psychological ones ( $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ), although the difference was not statistically significant,  $t(107) = .56$ ,  $p > .05$ . However, when prompted with a definition of psychological community, participants could readily identify the psychological communities to which they belonged, adding significantly more psychological communities ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) to their initial list than physical ones ( $M = .38$ ,  $SD = .70$ ),  $t(47) = -4.38$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### *Message Appeals*

As predicted, results suggest that community appeals emphasizing either physical or psychological sense of community do influence the volunteer activities in which participants are interested (see Figure 1). Participants that were shown an appeal highlighting physical sense of community expressed significantly greater interest in volunteering to benefit physical community, controlling for general interest,  $F(2, 104) = 4.81$ ,  $p < .05$ . Similarly, participants shown an appeal emphasizing psychological sense of community indicated significantly higher interest in volunteering to enhance psychological community,  $F(2, 104) = 3.16$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### Discussion

Our theorizing and research provide support for the proposition that community is salient. Participants were able to provide their personal definition of community and readily list the communities to which they belong. Importantly, results also emphasize that physical and psychological forms of community are distinct constructs. Previous literature in both community and environmental psychology has succeeded in documenting the importance of individuals’ sense of community in many aspects of their lives. However, despite using the term psychological sense of community, researchers have failed to consider it in a wholly psychological light. Community is most often assumed to reference a relatively bounded geographic region. More broadly though, psychological sense of community seems to involve feelings of belongingness and connection to others with shared concerns, but not necessarily shared geographic location.

Not only are physical and psychological notions of community distinct, but they also have identifiable links to social action. Participants expressed a higher interest in volunteer activities that matched the type

of community highlighted in the message appeal. These results illuminate the ways in which connections to communities can serve as a motivating force, drawing people into certain types of volunteerism and even sustaining their involvement over time.

By broadening current conceptualizations of psychological sense of community, future research will broaden the theoretical perspective within which we view community and action. A broader conceptualization is needed to assess an individual's sense of community, to fully explore how this sentiment affects his/her involvement in prosocial action and motivations to volunteer, as well as to examine how community can be both a motivating force and a resulting benefit from social engagement.

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