ARTICLE

SENSE OF COMMUNITY: ADVANCES IN MEASUREMENT AND APPLICATION

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This article summarizes theoretical and methodological advances in the study and application of a SOC, and serves as the introduction to a special issue devoted to this subject. Four themes emerged from the review. The first was that there continues to be a search for additional measures, despite the popularity of the SOC Index (SCI). Current investigations have begun to look at individual and group level effects of a SOC. Research continues to find an important and complicated relationship between the neighborhood (as a residential community) and a SOC, contrary to the proliferation of communities that are not based on place. Research was also discovered investigating the relationship between a SOC and history, attachment, and identity. A SOC was found to be used as a catalyst for community justice and change in several national and local initiatives. © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

In Seymour Sarason's seminal writing on the psychological sense of community (SOC) (Sarason, 1974), we were warned of difficulties if we tried to measure it with our traditional empirical approaches . . .

> "the concept 'psychological sense of community' is not a familiar one in psychology. . . . it does not sound precise, it obviously reflects a value judgment, and does not sound compatible with "hard" science. It is a phrase which is associated in the minds of many psychologists with a kind of maudlin togetherness, a tear-soaked emotional drippiness that misguided do-gooders seek to experience" (pp. 156–157)

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Yet, he maintained, people knew when they had it and when they didn't. He implied that if we wanted to know whether people had a SOC, we needed only to ask them. If only that was enough . . .

As this concept became regarded as a central "overarching value" for community psychology (Sarason, 1986), more attention was directed toward explicating the psychological dimensions of community. These efforts were driven partly by the need of the discipline to establish theoretical foundations for its values, principles, and areas of inquiry (Rappaport, 1977). In addition, practitioners wanted to assess the significance of SOC in sustaining the health of communities and to evaluate the impact of their interventions on residents' SOC (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986). To these ends, investigators took up Sarason's challenge of bringing SOC into the theoretical discourse and psychometric toolbox of psychologists.

This special issue marks the fourth effort since 1986 to capture the theoretical and methodological advances in the study of a SOC. The three prior issues (Newbrough & Chavis, 1986; Chavis & Newbrough, 1986; Newbrough, 1996) included theory, critiques, research, and a commentary from an international and multidisciplinary group of authors. This special issue illustrates the diversity in how researchers have come to ask questions about community and extends the work to areas of social policy and community initiatives. The substance of the questions posed by our contributors reflect their theoretical and personal notions of community, how one acquires a sense of it, and how larger social institutions can strengthen transform or destroy it. Researchers' constructions of their own community experience orient their hypotheses, methods, and interpretations of a community's responses. Hence we do not find a strict consensus regarding the definition, model, or method of researching a SOC in this issue, though the theory of a SOC developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) is a common starting point for these articles. Rather we continue to *make sense of community* from perspectives of social, environmental, and community psychology, sociology, ecology, social justice, and community development.

The examination of such a fundamental human experience as a SOC is far from over. This journal issue raises as many questions for future research as it resolves. Several themes emerge from these articles: the continued search for measures; the important relationship between neighborhood and SOC; the need to consider history, attachment, and identity; and the recognition that a SOC can be a catalyst for community justice and change.

THE CONTINUED SEARCH FOR MEASURES

Researchers do not appear ready to settle on a definitive and consistent SOC measure. Research teams strive to create a questionnaire capable of uncovering the characteristics of a particular setting with sensitivity to the residents' cultures and histories or their own conceptualization. Chipuer and Pretty (1999) discuss the contributions to the SOC domain made from different initiatives in scale development. More recent work described in this issue goes beyond concerns for questionnaire content and addresses larger conceptual methodology issues, such as the use of multiple levels of SOC data (Kingston, Mitchell, Florin, & Stevenson, 1999) and the complexities of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the community (Brodsky, O'Campo, & Aronson, 1999).

There is a debate among researchers as to whether a SOC manifests itself at the community as well as individual levels. A SOC is largely an individual experience, but Kingston et al. do address the earlier concerns of Felton and Shinn (1992) in terms of distinguishing between individual and extra-individual levels of measurement. Kingston et al. (1999) found distinctions between the perception of SOC from individual residents in a neighborhood vs. the overall neighborhood level of SOC. The determination of a

neighborhood level of SOC allowed for the investigation of SOC with other neighborhood level conditions (e.g., presence of a neighborhood association, crime, etc.) SOC derived from the sum of residents' total questionnaire scores is compared to SOC derived from an aggregation of residents' variance in questionnaire scores. The importance of determining what level of SOC is targeted before attempting interventions to influence it is supported in findings that neighborhood characteristics impact differently on individual versus neighborhood levels of SOC.

Brodsky et al. (1999) also visits the issue of multilevels of analysis using individual and community level variables. They demonstrate further how relationships between SOC and particular social factors can differ depending on the level of analysis (i.e., individual unemployment statistics versus community unemployment statistics). Brodsky et al. also expand the theoretical understanding of the dynamics of SOC dimensions by capturing the complexity of the interdependence between the individual and his or her surrounding community. While a bi-directional model of mutual influence has been hypothesized (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), few researchers have attempted to represent it in their analytical frameworks (c.f. Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Brodsky et al. (1999) used methods that mirror this relationship analyzing individual data being "nested" in community data, and aspects of the community being "nested" within the individual. Their findings were reminiscent of Ira Iscoe's ideas of the reciprocal association between the competent community and the competent individual citizen (Iscoe, 1974).

As Chipuer & Pretty (1999) reported, the Sense of Community Index (SCI) is the most used and broadly validated measure of a SOC. It has been associated with predicted relations across different types of communities, age groups, and cultures. The SCI as a whole has been a very useful, reliable, and valid measure. However, the inconsistent psychometric properties of the subscales have lead many researchers to eliminate items that are included in the SCI in order to maximize their psychometric statistical outcomes. Unfortunately, this has been at the expense of building a more cumulative theoretical and empirical foundation. The accessibility and favor of factor analytic techniques has resulted in a wide range of empirically derived dimensions of a SOC. Chipuer and Pretty report that many of these factor analyses of the SCI resulted in dimensions that were similar to the four elements of SOC proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). There are several other measures of SOC that have been developed (Allen & Allen, 1987; Berger, 1997; Davidson & Cotter, 1993; Glynn, 1981; Royal & Rossi, 1996). Several of these measures were developed by combining the SCI with other items or instruments and conducting factor analytic and face validity methods. These studies have generally supported the theory, but have distinguished themselves as separate measures. While investigators identify common problems and inconsistencies in the psychometric properties and factor structures of scales such as the SCI (Brodsky et al., 1999; Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996), much can be gained from persisting in a collaborative scale development effort.

Chipuer and Pretty (1999) suggested that the long form of the SCI reported by Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, and Wandersman (1986) might be a better measure. The "longer version" is based on a formula that was derived from 24 weighted items. These items were selected post-hoc from an already completed survey and they themselves may not be the preferred representatives of the theoretical elements. Consensus among researchers would help advance our understanding of this basic human experience so that the theoretical understanding presented by McMillan and Chavis (1986) can be elaborated and better specified. Again, it may be that a new collaborative effort to develop a SOC measure based on the theory of a SOC would advance the methodology for measuring SOC and result in a more acceptable measure.

The question as to whether we need an individual response based solely on a quantitative measure of SOC begs asking. The limitations and bias of such methods in terms of ecological and cultural validity for community level inquiry have resulted in the promotion of qualitative research processes (Hines, 1993; Hughes, Seidman, & Williams, 1993; Maton, 1993). However, despite the relative shortcomings of each method, the interpretation of consistencies and inconsistencies of research findings is enhanced by the different kinds of information provided by diverse methods of SOC inquiry. There are other measures of SOC and related concepts that are worth consideration in future research (Buckner, 1988; Lambert & Hopkins, 1995; Weenig, Schmidt, & Midden, 1990; Robinson & Wilkinson, 1995).

There is also a need to develop a valid measure of a SOC based on environmental and other systems level indicators. Plas and Lewis (1996) have begun to develop such qualitative indicators of SOC. Theory and research are needed to determine the composition of physical and systemic components of community that affect an individual's perception of his or her group and SOC. However, while we search for environmental and systemic indicators relevant to geographically based communities, we also need to identify the symbols or other indicators of a SOC not based on physical proximity. This exploration will certainly benefit from the use of participant observation and other qualitative methods.

THE IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOOD AND SOC

Community psychologists have integrated research from environmental psychology to uncover the interplay between our psychosocial well being and the physical surroundings of that place we call home—our neighborhood (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Low & Altman, 1992; Prochansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Puddifoot, 1995). This interdependence has not been studied extensively in the SOC literature, as the latter tends to focus primarily on the relational aspects of community. Several contributors in this issue give us further insight into those aspects of SOC that are situated within our residential territory.

Garcia, Giuliani, & Wiesenfeld (1999) described SOC as it evolved through the struggles of creating and sustaining homes within an economically impoverished Venezuelan community. Garcia et al.'s exploration of community development is at a "concrete brick" level. It illustrates the psychological significance of physically creating one's home to meet basic shelter and safety needs within community. The participants describe experiences that would be rare to most of us of this generation, the construction of a community planned and executed by residents themselves. Observations of Garcia et al. about this neighborhood are particularly interesting when compared to the professionally planned and developed communities as described by Plas and Lewis (1996). Venezuelan residents' reflections on their community's history of survival exemplify the power of community development to affect SOC at its most fundamental level.

Recent studies are demonstrating the important role that neighborhood context plays in the development of a SOC. Kingston et al. (1999) also looked for evidence of whether a commonly held SOC occurred within a specific urban neighborhood. Unlike Garcia et al.'s interest in the history of residents constructing the built community, the Kingston et al. study considered how residents in an existing neighborhood with limited influence over their environment were only minimally affected by the neighborhood level of SOC. The findings of Kingston et al. indicate that different community levels of SOC are identifiable within specific residential contexts. However, unlike the residents of the Venezuelan barrio, these American urban dwellers did not show a relationship be-

tween neighborhood SOC and neighboring behavior, or between SOC and the presence of community organizations. Earlier studies have found significant relations, on the individual level between SOC and neighboring (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990) Neighborhood SOC's ability to predict behavior is limited.

The findings of the Kingston et al. study regarding the effects of neighborhood context on SOC are contrasted further by those of Brodsky et al. (1999). This investigation continued the tradition of studying SOC at the individual level of analysis. Like the study of Garcia et al., it showed the strength of interpersonal bonds and community involvement in enabling individuals, and the collective as a whole, to have a SOC in the face of poor and hostile socioeconomic conditions in America. This finding is similar to earlier SOC studies (Chavis & Wandersman, 1993). Brodsky et al. caution against making assumptions about the underlying economic conditions of a community. While often they are used as an indicator of the quality of the physical residential environment they may not be indicative of the quality of social life or the individual's SOC. These economic conditions can have different effects in different communities because of unique contextual and individual characteristics. For example, Brodsky and colleagues in this and earlier works (Brodsky, 1996) uncover an important dynamic relation in the experience of a SOC when the community is considered aversive. Residents, in this case often women with children, need to defend themselves psychologically (as well as sometimes physically) from what is posited by the authors as a hostile environment.

THE CONSIDERATION OF HISTORY, ATTACHMENT AND IDENTITY

While the different methods of inquiry used by the contributors to this issue vary, they all uncover a common factor. The community psychologist must appreciate a community's history and must know where the community is in its development. Appreciation for the communities' personality as it evolves and for its stage of development at the time of investigation is clearly demonstrated by Brodsky et al. They found that owning one's home within a neighborhood that had recently undergone gentrification, compared to owning one's home in a stable longstanding neighborhood, has different implications for SOC.

The importance of history is also implicated in the development of SOC situated within a territorial neighborhood. The historical context of one's community is important in understanding attachment and identity, as Garcia et al. and Kingston et al. indicate. Differences in levels of SOC may be understood in terms of the degree to which residents actually identify with and have an attachment to place. Investigators such as Prochansky et al. (1983) and Puddifoot (1995) have theorized on the nature of the relationship between these constructs. It may be that attachment and identity mediate between the geographical community and whether the resident has a SOC there. The work of Sonn & Fischer (1999) lends some insight into this.

Sonn and Fisher challenge us to consider the SOC of members of a minority group who form a relational community embedded within a geographic community dominated by the culture of a majority group. They describe the need of individual minority group members to establish an identity, or a place, within the dominant community so the group as a whole can "better itself." They depict the cognitions and behaviors of the minority community members as they try to accomplish this. This adaptive effort is undertaken despite their attachment to their community of origin, which is based on their shared identity with its salient history. Fisher and Sonn explore these intergroup processes in terms of the struggles between cultural identity and the need for belonging within

the larger community. Their analysis suggests the importance of understanding community attachment and identity formation in light of the need for a SOC with what is perceived to be the empowered community.

SOC AS A CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY JUSTICE AND CHANGE

Having a SOC has been shown to be a catalyst for civic participation (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). In recent years there has been a broadening awareness of the catalytic affects of SOC by government, foundations, and community organizations. The SOC, the relations among members, and the network of community institutions can fuel and disperse comprehensive solutions to community problems. The community-based initiatives developed over the last thirty years have intellectually and practically coalesced around the idea of a community building approach. This approach, according to McNeely (1999), "builds community in individual neighborhoods" by

> " . . . neighbors learning to rely on each other, working together on concrete tasks that take advantage of new self-awareness of their collective and individual assets, and in the process, creating human, family, and social capital . . . "(p. 742)

McNeely outlines the successes of community building initiatives in distressed urban communities, as do others in greater detail (Kingsley, McNeely, & Gibson, 1997; Schorr, 1997). The strength of these solutions comes from the values, relations, and other assets that keep people together as a community—their SOC. McNeeley presents themes derived from a review of successful community building initiatives. These themes emphasize how essential the community "ties that bind" are for positive community change to occur. As research previously reviewed in this article shows, change occurs at both the community and individual level. The interdependence of the two are both the strength and challenge of this approach.

Karp (1999) advances the notion of community justice as "all variants of crime prevention and justice activities that explicitly include the community in their processes." Community justice, as described by Karp, has as its central focus a transformation of service-based crime prevention and criminal sanctioning processes to community-level outcomes. This shifts the emphasis from "individual incidents to systemic patterns, from individual conscience to social mores, and from individual goods to the common good." (p. 751–752). In the analysis and examples provided in his paper, Karp demonstrates the emerging understanding that justice in our society is more likely to endure if it comes from within rather than from outside a community. A SOC can bring justice to a community by stimulating individuals and organizations to act on common "just" values. The commitment to one another at the heart of SOC can result in the mobilization of resources and guidance for effective prevention efforts and appropriate sanctioning methods.

CONCLUSIONS

The study and application of a SOC continues to evolve. What is most exciting is that the advances in measurement and applications are happening across cultures, disciplines, and include both scientists and practitioners. The articles in this journal issue come from three continents and cover the experiences of a multitude of racial and ethnic groups. This growing international search for a greater understanding and application of community by sci-

entists and practitioners reflects both the universality of the experience of a SOC and the hope it provides us to address the problems we face as we enter the new millennium.

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