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Psychological sense of community and its relevance to well-being and everyday life in Australia

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September 2006

Abstract

Sense of community is a concept that has considerable currency within a vast range of disciplines and practices. It serves as a criterion for the assessment of social capital; the generation of social policies; the development of social and geographical communities; and the evaluation of community capacity building. Community psychologists consider it central to their value-based praxis in promoting social justice and social change. However it is also employed as a common lay term to refer to feelings of belonging, identity and support. It occurs in public domain discourse such as reporting community response to disaster, promoting the value of a rural lifestyle, and advertising urban residential developments. For psychologists, and other professionals and policy makers, there is the real need to consider the processes that are inherent in living in a community, in providing services and interventions, in understanding processes of inclusion and exclusion, with resultant positive or negative impacts on mental and physical health.

Because sense of community discourses are utilised for such diverse purposes, this paper is written for multiple constituencies with a view to encouraging and informing its use in collaborative efforts to develop and sustain healthy Australian communities. We present an overview of its multidisciplinary theoretical origins and the more recent empirical foundations of quantitative and qualitative assessment methods. We then suggest ways in which this theory and research informs and progresses several challenges within Australian community culture, from the broad context of health, to specific population subgroups including diverse cultures, immigrants and youth, and to specific issues such as natural resource management and building the social coalition for government sponsored program delivery. While providing a resource for researchers and practitioners, the paper also critically examines the work yet to be done to position sense of community as an empirically sound and culturally sensitive psychological construct.

Acknowledgements

The scope of this paper has not permitted us to cite all of the work being done in Australia by academics and community practitioners across psychology and other disciplines. We wish to acknowledge the contribution of our colleagues in informing this paper and thank them for their ongoing commitment to the work of understanding and building of community.

Sense of community discourses and definitions

Psychology and psychologists are often faced with concepts that have professional and research meanings, but which also have quite differing lay meanings. It is a tightrope that psychologists walk in order to offer understanding and integrate meaning across these levels. Indeed, at times the lay meaning can serve to undermine the significance of the psychological approaches. Sense of community is one such concept.

Sense of community is an idea and ideal that appears in the popular press, government policy, schools' mission statements, and many other places. For example, in the Domain Express section of The Age newspaper in Melbourne we saw such headlines as: "Sense of community emerges as drawcard of housing development living" (Welch, 2005, p. 24). These articles focus on a mix of urban design, social interaction and resource sharing, and children playing together as the important elements of community life. Sense of community is used as a given, not even requiring definition. Sense of community is seen as an unequivocally desirable state. It promotes that idea of nice people living near us, people like us with similar backgrounds, experiences and aspirations. The commonsense, and often professional, idea of sense of community is derived from images of the past that are projected as idealised forms of living.

Much of the current literature makes reference to the conceptualisation by Tönnies (1887/1955) when he made his distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (sometimes thought of as the village or small town with strong kin and friendship linkages), and *Gessellschaft* (the impersonal city). In urban design and new housing estates, New Urbanists focus on the small scale. Walking and social interactions are prime aspects promoting community life using such images as: "Time was, families coming to the beach stayed in simple cottages in beach towns where porch-sitting and strolling were activities at least as important as swimming and sunbathing" (Seaside Institute, 2005). Many new estates have (and advertise) parks as central meeting areas, with pathways to follow, and sometimes community centres with coffee shops for neighbours to meet and interact.

Even in psychology, social work, community development and sociology community is often seen as a buffer against the hard challenges people face. Community offers support and identity derived from those nearby or with whom there are meaningful ongoing interactions. These conceptualisations extend beyond just social support, and they are similar to such lay ideas that also focus on the positive aspects of community. However these conceptualisations do not recognise the actual psychological processes and outcomes inherent within the concept. Indeed, they often reflect a very static picture of sense of community, as an outcome to be desired and achieved. For psychologists, and other professionals and policy makers, there is the real need to consider the processes that are inherent in living in a community, in providing services and interventions, in understanding processes of inclusion and exclusion, with resultant positive, or negative impacts on mental and physical health.

While sense of community can facilitate desired outcomes, or provide buffers against significant challenges, it can also serve negative ends. Hugh McKay (2005) has indicated ways in which Australian society has turned inwards as the threat of terrorism and international turmoil is publicised. This produces a protective approach in which we move more and more to the familiar and act to construct community such that it excludes those people and things that are different. In the broad debate on immigration and political change in Australia, Fisher and Sonn (2002) discussed the ways in which calls to icons, images and ideals could be used to reinforce the 'real'

Australian identity and show who are the ‘others’. This discourse continues with the dehumanising of the ‘others’ in detention centres and political rhetoric over refugees and asylum seekers.

Much of the research and practice related to sense of community focuses on the positive aspects of meaningful community life and engagement. While this is a crucial aspect to well-being and mental health promotions, it is only a part of the story. It is also important to understand the negative ways in which sense of community can operate; ways that promote division and negative mental health states for those who may be excluded from the benefits of community membership and resources.

Sense of community has substantial theorising, research and practice in psychology and other discipline areas, yet there are still those who view it as a rather warm and fuzzy concept at best, perhaps as an advertising slogan, or at worst as a manipulation by politicians to build antagonism between groups.

As psychologists we must contend with concepts of sense of community and its many related dimensions which also have many professional and lay meanings. Indeed there is a band of such concepts used in discourses of the psychological literature and government policies. For example, the term ‘empowerment’ has, at times, been captured by policy makers to gloss over real inequities in society without recognition of the power and impact that sense of community has in people’s lives. Similarly, social capital is to be built because it is good, as are social cohesion, community building and community capacity building. Much can be made also of attachment to and sense of place as positives for community membership.

Because sense of community discourses are utilised for such diverse purposes, this paper is written for multiple constituencies: community theorists, consulting psychologists, social activists and lobbyists, and those who drive the political and policy agendas related to community well-being. Often disparate from each other, we believe collaborative efforts to understand and sustain diverse Australian communities could be enhanced with a common reference point. The inclusion of sense of community as process and desired outcome within such collaborative work is both empirically and socially defensible. In this paper we address issues pertaining to each constituency; we present an historical overview of sense of community, reviewing its theory and assessment, and then explore ways in which it can be used in psychology to help promote people’s health and well-being.

An historical snapshot of sense of community

Within psychology, sense of community has not been positioned as a key factor in understanding or changing human behaviour. The extent to which it has been deeply conceptualised and implemented is still limited when compared to other psychological constructs. To support our position that sense of community has a sound conceptual foundation we present an overview of decades of thought, debate and action that underpin its current theoretical and operational definitions. We begin with consideration of the word ‘community’.

Fifty years ago Hillery (1955) documented 94 descriptive definitions of community. Generally the term is used to describe social organisations, both formal and informal, that are bounded by a physical or geographical location (neighbourhood, school), or are constituted on the basis of common interests, goals or needs (sporting, hobby or political groups), or in the case of Aboriginal peoples, a network of kin. The term community describes a specialised branch of psychology as well as the conceptual heart of its paradigms and practice.

Research demonstrates that the phrase 'sense of community' resonates with members of these different kinds communities, including layers of a residential community (Brodsky & Marx, 2001), interest groups and virtual communities (Obst, Zinkiewicz & Smith, 2002). It is not just the layers of communities that need to be considered, but also the fact that each person is a member of many communities at any one time – national, gender, political, religious groups, etc. At different times these have different salience, with each person having a primary community on which they draw at times of significant challenge (Fisher & Sonn, 1999).

Current ideas of sense of community have evolved from a rich multidisciplinary ancestry situated in socio-political as well as theoretical domains. Tönnies (1887/1955) expressed concern and dissatisfaction with changes in social structures. He argued that *Gemeinschaft* was being superseded by *Gesellschaft*. The supportive interdependence, mutual responsibility and common goals of village and town life were being lost to the highly differentiated and individualistic nature of larger scaled structures of *Gesellschaft*. Durkheim's work (1964) continued to explore this erosion of cohesiveness and collective consciousness, particularly due to the formation of community around interests rather than locality. On the one hand rural sociologists wrote about the demise of the unconscious process of sense of community which was "...closely woven in to the fabric of tradition and morality as to be scarcely more noticeable than the air men breathe" (Nisbet, 1962, p 57), but others were critical of undue nostalgia for the village life, and turned to neighbourhoods as the new site for community (Warren, 1963).

Environmental and ecological theories of human behaviour gave psychologists a position from which to argue the relevance of community to individual and group well-being. Research in social environments, social group cohesion and identity, and social networks provided a window into the contexts within which individual behaviour was played out. Lewin (1951) proposed that $B = f(P, E)$, that is behaviour is a function of the person, the environment and the interaction between the two. To fully understand behaviour, Kelly (1966) proposed we think of relationships among persons, their social *and* physical environments. For Barker (1968) the physical locale was the behavioural context in which the nature of the physical setting itself (e.g., schools, therapeutic communities, neighbourhoods), defined and moderated behaviour. Ecological perspectives maintained the physical characteristics of behavioural contexts do not exist independently of the place where the behaviour occurs. The place itself can alter positively or negatively the cognitions, affect and behaviour of its inhabitants (see Heft, 2001). These ideas would later inform an understanding of community as geographical as well as social place (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983).

It was during this time of reconsidering the role of context in psychological well-being, that the residential community was introduced as a site and a source for mental health consultation. Consultation models proposed interventions for each level of community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) including the residential community. This orientation toward community within the mental health field brought a renewed interest and inquiry into characteristics of community life.

The socio-political momentum around concern for the demise of the *Gemeinschaft*, the inclusion of person-environment interaction in paradigms to explore human behaviour, and the growing conviction that community prevention was better than individual intervention, influenced Sarason's (1974) belief that sense of community was paramount to quality of life and well-being. Sarason (1974), in his seminal work on sense of community, described it as the feeling that one is part of a readily available, supportive and dependable structure, **that is part of everyday life**

and not just when disasters strike. He warned it may be difficult to bring the concept into the theoretical and empirical traditions of mainstream psychology because:

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 drappiness that misguided do-gooders seek to experience (p 156-157).

Yet, he maintained, people knew when they had it and when they didn't.

Inherent in this psychological construction of sense of community is the interdependence, mutual responsibility and collective consciousness notions of theorists such as Nisbet and Durkheim. When Sarason (1982) argued that the building of US highways was a considerable threat to its citizens' sense of community and psychological wellbeing, he was echoing Tönnies concerns about the destruction of *Gemeinschaft*. He argued that the state can create segregation of various groups of people, such as the mentally ill, disabled or deviant. *Gesellschaft* thinking leads to increased alienation of these people and a reduction of any sense of community they had.

Sense of community is considered to transcend individualism and is distinctive from individual-level constructs such as social support. It is an extra-individual construct. Communities of people have a role as a whole system in supportive transactions (Felton & Shinn, 1992) within which notions about communal efficacy and social capital are generated. Well functioning communities are supportive, even though one may not have personal relationships with each individual member. Furthermore, members may continue to have a sense of community even though individuals come and go. Hence, sense of community can be an illusive cognition and affect which is not necessarily based on experiencing individual-level transactions. More recently research has sought to understand these psychological processes in terms of social identity theory (Obst, Zinkiewicz & Smith, 2002). As Sarason suggests, we have a "feeling" that the community and all that it holds is available to us, though we may never ask.

Since community, and characteristics related to it, were identified as a source of prevention and intervention consultation, efforts to define, assess and develop sense of community have been ongoing. Our account of this work to date is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather it highlights the conceptual and methodological issues facing practitioners when representing sense of community as a process in program consultation and as an outcome in program evaluation.

Assessing sense of community

Considerable research has been undertaken into sense of community over the last two decades. Summaries of this work are found in several special issues of the *Journal of Community Psychology*, and more recently in an Australian edited book *Psychological Sense of Community: Research, Applications and Implications* (Fisher, Sonn & Bishop, 2002). Many definitions have developed (Buckner, 1988; Davidson & Cotter, 1986; Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; Glynn, 1981; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Nasar & Julian, 1995; Riger & Lavrakas, 1981).

Perhaps the most accepted model of sense of community was introduced by McMillan and Chavis (1986) which includes many of the sociological and political ideals described earlier. Components include *membership*, feelings of emotional safety with a sense of belonging and identification; *influence*, exertion of one's influence on the community with reciprocal influence of the community on oneself; *integration and fulfillment of needs*,

physical and psychological needs met thereby reinforcing one to behaviour in a manner acceptable to the community; and *shared emotional connection*, positive affect related to community membership. This model has retained its prominence partly because a measure of sense of community, the Sense of Community Index (SCI: Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman & Chavis, 1990; Long & Perkins, 2003) was developed on the basis of it.

Overall inquiries regarding sense of community seek observations and experiences of one's inclusion, participation and belonging and commitment within an identified community. Several questionnaires have been developed for use within survey methodologies. Most of these are for residential community research and consultation (Buckner, 1988; Davidson & Cotter, 1986; Glynn, 1986; Obst et al., 2002; Puddifoot, 2003), and can explore sense of community at various levels or layers of structure (Brodsky & Marx, 2001). Others are constructed for settings such as work (Klein & D'Aunno, 1986; Royal & Rossi, 1996) and education settings (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Lounsbury & DeNeui 1996). While some researchers have cautioned making assumptions about similarities between geographical and relational communities (Hill, 1996), other researchers have demonstrated such similarities between diverse communities of residential, neighbourhoods and the virtual community of a science fiction fan club (Obst, Smith & Zinkiewicz, 2002).

There are limitations to these questionnaires and survey techniques in terms of the external and conceptual validity of the data they generate. Whichever measure is used its interpretation is restricted by the lack of norms for sense of community data. It is difficult to determine whether a score is a "good" or a "bad" value. As such, many researchers use measures of sense of community in conjunction with other scales that have normative data, for example, the General Health Questionnaire. Other researchers and practitioners measure sense of community at the beginning and end of interventions, with an increased score considered a positive outcome. Another problem arises when the question of multiple communities is indicated. While the researcher may attempt to gather data about the importance of a target community, that community may not have salience for the participants at that time. For example, if we want to gather sense of community data in a school, students who are disengaged may find little salience in this idea. Outcome data showing low scores does not mean necessarily that they have no sense of community, and gain no benefits from the school. It may mean that at that time the participants gain support and identity from other communities to which they belong.

An alternative approach to assessing sense of community was taken in a project involving of a number of rural towns in Victoria (Coakes, Fenton & Gabriel, 1999). They used the reparatory grid, a quantitative, phenomenological approach originally developed by Kelly (1955). This involves communities selecting their own constructs for analysis, and residents' ratings being based on these elements.

As the field of community psychology works toward more substance in building community theory, discussions continue around empirical evidence of sense of community. Debates consider how it is best assessed, whether by using quantitative methods (Chavis & Pretty, 1999) or more culturally sensitive and less disenfranchising qualitative methods (Bishop & Vicary, 2003).

A feature of much of this research is that it has been based in the notion of sense of community as a desired state, an outcome variable. But there are other ways of conceptualising it, which suggest the use of other research methods:

For many, sense of community is seen as some type of end state, a positive in and of itself. Others see it as a predictor of other positive, or negative, outcomes. That is, we need a sense of community to achieve a series of benefits. Still another way of

understanding sense of community is as a process in which the members interact, draw identity, social support, and make their own contributions to the common good. (Bess, Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002, p. 6).

Those assessing sense of community must recognise the level and type of community that is being considered. A basic distinction can be made between locational (place based), and relational (social interaction based) communities. That is, assessments must be conceptually valid in order to assess a localised geographic community (e.g., a town, neighbourhood), or some other type of geographical community (state, nation), or to assess a relational community and the actual interactions reflected in those communities.

To understand the nature, processes and experience of sense of community at any one time for a particular community it is necessary to have some appreciation of the community's history. It is difficult to capture this history from quantitative surveys. "[A] community has a distinctive history that, although it may not seem relevant in a psychological sense, is crucial to understanding some of its present qualities and social, political, religious, or economic characteristics. A community has changed, is changing, and will change again" (Sarason, 1974, p. 131). Alternative interview methods that invite people to tell stories about the life and experiences of their community can uncover rich data. Furthermore, these data have all the hallmarks of the philosophy and values of community psychology in that they are context specific and culturally sensitive without the presumptions or interpretations of the researcher often implicit in forced-choice measures (Rappaport, 2000).

Much is being written about qualitative methodology in terms of its underlying implicit and distinct way of thinking about research and the rigour of its techniques (see Banyard & Miller, 1998), as well as the reciprocal benefits of its use with quantitative methods (Langhout, 2003). Narrative methods are one qualitative alternative that 'gives voice' to community members. Information can be gathered explicitly about the experience of sense of community and the processes that underlie a specific community. The spectrum of qualitative methods used to investigate sense of community includes structured interview and focus group formats (e.g., Brodsky, 1996; Dunham, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusells, Ellsworth, & Dodd, 1998; Henry, 1997; Scourfield, Evans, Shah & Beynon, 2002). More recently photovoice methods, where participants are invited to take photographs of images that portray every day life in their community, have further expanded our ability to "hear" from people with language and developmental difficulties (see Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell & Pestronk, 2004).

However these methods are also not without their critics (e.g., Rapley & Pretty, 1999). Indeed the theoretical debates regarding the affective, cognitive, behavioural, and spiritual aspects of sense of community (McMillan, 1996) are surpassed in intensity only by similar debates regarding how to capture the nature of this construct through an assessment approach (Bishop & Vicary, 2003). These revolve around some unresolved issues in measurement where individual differences methods fail to deal with people with significant alienation and a corresponding lack of sense of community. While qualitative methods can address the issue of a substantial lack of sense of community, they do not allow for generalisation of outcomes.

While there may be debate about the appropriateness and adequacy of methods to assess sense of community, there are some general principles that guide the utility of specific methods. If the data are to be used for policy advice and formulation, it is often preferable to have quantitative data, especially where this can be linked to other data sources. If the aim of the data gathering is community building, then a number of

the qualitative approaches (including participatory action research, photovoice, and narrative enquiry) may be more useful.

In the previous sections, we have laid out some of the theoretical and research issues in sense of community. The aim of this was to demonstrate the shift from lay conceptualisations and usage to the substantive bases in psychology. We now move to ways in which the theory and research can be seen as operating within a range of specific contexts, from the broad context of health, to specific sub-groups such as immigrants and youth. From these, samples of actions and interventions can be derived.

Community and health

Research indicates that sense of community and related factors have significant positive impacts on a range of outcomes for individuals and groups (Davidson & Cotter, 1991). Conversely, a lack of connections, identity and supports inherent in sense of community may lead to less positive outcomes.

Social epidemiologists have demonstrated how community connections, belonging, networks, cohesion, and social capital play a significant role in the health, well-being, and mental health outcomes of populations and sub-groups. Syme (2000) has shown that traditional epidemiological risk factors account for only about 40% of the variance when studying cardiovascular mortality and morbidity. Hence, 60% of the variance has yet to be accounted for, and much of this relates to the social determinants that can be understood in terms of sense of community.

Extending these ideas, Berkman and Glass (2000), and Kawachi and Berkman (2000) place the contexts of networks, social cohesion, and particularly social engagement and control, as crucial to the promotion of community level health and well-being. Essentially, they show that sense of community and social capital can play a significant part in people's lives. These factors may even help to keep many people alive. The ways that neighbourhood social processes can mediate and moderate community-level socioeconomic disadvantage, and health problem related to it, have been well documented (Browning & Cagney, 2003). The key elements identified across this research are meaningful social contact and positive social cohesion. Without these, the person and the group flounder.

Research by Scuderi (2005) has drawn upon this in the examination of a group of cardiac rehabilitation patients who are immigrants from Italy. His analyses demonstrated that the traditional model of rehabilitation focusing on education, diet and exercise was far from the most effective aspect of the program. Participants reported that the social contact with those who spoke the same language and who had shared similar experiences and histories were paramount. Added to this, meaningful roles and activities inside and outside the family were even more important. Similarly, Lee and Cubin (2002) identified relationships between neighbourhood factors and cardiovascular health behaviours in young people.

This research follows a basic tenet of community psychology, the need to understand the multiple levels at which a problem can be analysed, and the multiple levels at which interventions can take place. Where a traditional focus is placed on individual level interventions and individual outcomes, it is possible to miss the significance of the context in which the individual and group are functioning.

An interesting part of the work of the social epidemiologists is that they draw on the 19th Century work of Durkheim as described earlier. The focus here is on the profound impact that type of community had on suicide rates, and what we now can learn from this about community engagement, and of valuing community members.

In summary, the role of belonging to a defined community allows members a freedom to express their identity and roots, their emotions and shared history within a safe context. They are able to hold valued positions within a community, and relate positively to others who have similar histories and experiences. Beyond social support (itself a major positive factor for many with health issues) the sense of community provides a buffer against physical and psychological symptoms of illness, and facilitates adjustment. Indeed recognition of the capacity of a community to address many of its members' needs has become formalised as the basis for a political policy of building a "social coalition" to address many health and social issues in Australia.

Building the 'social coalition'; sense of community in policy

While there is some thought that sense of community is an ideal, some policy developments at the federal level suggest we may need to think of it as vital in sustaining many government support programs. In 2000 the Australian government launched a policy of addressing community health and social issues through the development of a 'social coalition'. This involves a partnership between the Australian people and all levels of government in new initiatives to address social issues (Australian, January 2000).

The thrust of this policy change was the engagement of business, non-profit community organisations and individual volunteers with government agencies to promote outcomes through the sharing of resources and expertise. This was not to suggest a shift in how Australians have taken care of and supported each other.

Much of Australia's everyday activity is possible because of the volunteer non-profit sector of our culture, from assistance in homeless shelters to the sport and recreation for all ages. As Warburton and Oppenheimer (2000) describe, "volunteering and volunteer work have been part of the social and economic fabric of Australian society since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788" (p 2). However, volunteering has been underestimated and undervalued. More importantly, at a time when programs sustaining aspects of our quality of life may become more dependent on the commitment of volunteers, the numbers of volunteers are dropping. Furthermore, if psychology is to contribute to addressing this, we will need more substantial theory and research to inform the development and sustenance of the social coalition.

While much has been written about volunteerism from the perspectives of individual differences in altruism, helping behaviour and prosocial action, the role of community context is also emerging as an important aspect. The extent of social coalition being sought by government policy will require sustaining communities of volunteers over a long period of time. It will involve maintaining commitment amongst people who do not necessarily have personal bonds or a sense of obligation between each other. It will require a sense of community.

A growing body of literature is suggesting that it is essential to understand the community context shared by volunteers and recipients of their assistance as this will uncover the components of cooperation and caring in our society. In this regard, Omoto and Snyder (2002) demonstrated how sense of community encourages and maintains people's connection and responsibility toward each other when they are not personally acquainted. Davidson and Cotter (1989) found citizen participation in various political activities was significantly related to sense of community, and that this sense could be a catalyst for engaging in community development activities. In an extensive study in New York City, Perkins and his colleagues (Perkins et al., 1990)

found participation in residential block associations to be associated with high levels of sense of community.

Sense of community seems to provide the basis for what Iscoe called the 'competent community' (Cottrell, 1976; Iscoe, 1974). It generates communal efficacy (we can do together what we cannot accomplish on our own), responsibility and concern for social justice amongst its inhabitants. This is an important motivational aspect that keeps the social coalition and the social justice agenda progressing through economically and socially demanding times. An exceptional example of this within a poor Venezuelan barrio (Garcia, Giuliani and Wiesenfeld, 1999) shows how grassroots determination built not only the bricks and mortar of the physical community, but also the psychological sense of this community against all economic and social odds. Similarly, in some of Australia's most economically and socially disadvantaged suburbs, residents' sense of community has mediated the lack of consequences of crime, child abuse and poor physical and mental health (Vinson, 2004). Findings suggest that a socially cohesive structure can offset the need for extensive individual financial support. When there is a sense of community any individual support generates much 'common good'; "the social whole is worth more than the sum of its parts" (Cuthill, 2002, p. 190). Studies such as these lend further credence to those who argue that economic well-being will not automatically result in social and community well-being (Cox, 2000).

A further example of the naturally occurring social coalition within Australian communities was uncovered when researchers investigated possible social impacts of changes to Federal Government forestry policy (Coakes & Fenton, 2001). As part of the social assessment process, measures of social vulnerability and community vulnerability were developed. One of the factors found to be related to social vulnerability was the history of responses to social upheavals in the past. It appeared that exposure to past dramatic social and/or economic change led to communities' abilities to resist and survive change. It seemed that past exposure to change created awareness of the importance of community which in turn allowed a community to more effectively deal with imposed change.

We are hopeful that the evolution of the social coalition from a community's history may balance imposed political will for prospective economic advantage with community will to maintain its identity and quality of life. It is further encouraging that assessment of community vulnerability is considered in decision making processes, and we maintain that sense of community is one of the more significant indicators of resilience and adaptability to change.

Sense of community and place

The sense that one has of one's community is not totally dependent on the social environment. The geographical location, or place, including its natural and built environments (e.g., Green, 1999; Kim & Kaplan, 2004) can contribute to the affect, cognitions and behaviour defining the 'sense' of one's community. This develops as a result of social interactions between people within specific places, such as the memorial ceremonies held at sites of historical significance, and between people and places, such as the protests to stop land clearing (Fried, 2000; Gustafson, 2000). Indeed research has demonstrated that the physical characteristics of the built environment can facilitate the development of sense of community (Plas & Lewis, 1996). Urban planners promise this experience may be produced by designs that foster informal social contact between neighbours (e.g., Hillier, 2002; Kuo, Sullivan, Coley & Brunson, 1998; Talen, 2000) and reconstitute the neighbourhood as an important

element in developing one's sense of community (Farrell, Audry & Coulombe, 2004; Glynn, 1986). However, as Hillier (2002) points out in her observations on the efforts of planners in Western Australia to 'create community', the real meaning of these designer communities are not always so obvious to the residents.. Furthermore, work by Brodsky (1996) suggests that not all cohesive neighbourhoods instil a desire to belong or be associated with it. Within communities identified as 'risky' for children, some residents purposefully resist developing a sense of community. Brodsky suggest that such a negative sense of community may be adaptive where neighbourhoods are considered to be more a threat than a resource. Her work also raises socioeconomic issues related to sense of community, such as home ownership and length of residence (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Coakes & Bishop, 2002; Robinson & Wilkinson, 1995). These factors become of interest and concern when considering settlement issues of immigrants to Australia and migrant workers, to be discussed later in this paper.

Other researchers assessing physical environment have considered the population of community to be relevant to sense of community (Prezza & Costantini, 1998). However, findings have come to support the position of Freudenberg (1986) who concluded that these relationships were attenuated by the accessibility of primary social supports, which he argued may be available in a town of any size. Some sense of community researchers concur with Freudenberg. Even within larger, more densely populated urban communities, the boundaries of community expand or contract to be inclusive of those with similar interests, needs and resources in both geographical and relational communities (Brodsky & Marx, 2001).

Of particular interest to the Australian context is how research related to size and location of community has come to inform social, environmental and economic issues associated with rural and remote Australia. Approximately 20% of Australians live in rural areas while about 70% live within the district of a capitol city (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). This means that conversations about equity of services for those taxpayers living 'in the bush' are also about rights of the minority, further complicated by positioning rural dwellers as having chosen to live in disparate regions of the country.

Social and geographical divisions between country and town are, however, becoming less clear (Lockie & Bourke, 2001). Those who leave the towns to seek inexpensive retirement options and lifestyle changes complicate the identity of the rural community and the social meaning of its geopolitical space (Brown, 2002). The development of community identity in the new rural 'melting pot' will be an important issue in developing and sustaining the "social coalition" in rural areas.

Indeed it is in matters of place and environment that political struggles between rural and urban inhabitants are most evident around issues of managing natural resources. The National Landcare Program initiated in 1989 is one example of a social coalition approach to community problem solving. It has been heralded as a success story of government supported community action through networks of small volunteer groups (Curtis, Britton & Sobels, 1999). The Landcare and the National Heritage Trust (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998) were established to motivate and provide Australians with opportunities to learn about biodiversity and conservation. Through community development activities centred around social interaction with colleagues and neighbours (Millar & Curtis, 1997) projects were organised that aimed at preserving and reclaiming waterways, forests and grasslands. The central tenet of the Landcare movement was that residents should be the people setting priorities for natural resource management in their localities. Furthermore, supported by

government-funded technologists, communities could directly affect their natural resource destiny.

Consistent with Kim and Kaplan (2004) and Green (1999), Landcare is based on the interaction of the social aspects of community and the natural resources that are inherent in the local areas. It is understood in terms of concerted community action to meet the significant physical environmental challenges of salinity and soil degradation. In this way, both the physical environment and the sense of community of participants are improved.

While there have been many documented successes from this program (Lockie, 2000), there has been growing criticism regarding the actual attitudinal, behavioural and technological changes of community members (Curtis, 2000). This had led to consideration of the psychology of the community in addition to those factors related to the willingness of residents to volunteer. Pretty, Bramston and Zammit (2004) demonstrated a significant link between Landcare volunteers' identity and attachment with their Queensland communities and their motivation to participate. This suggests that the sense one has of one's community is related to their intention and behaviour to protect and restore the ecology of that place. This further suggests that development of a town's sense of community, or regeneration of a town's awareness of this sense, may be a first step in promoting the natural resource management agenda.

This research points to the importance of attending to the complex relationship between community and place in terms of building the social coalition for care and maintenance of the social and natural resources of rural and remote Australia

Sense of community and diversity

Thomas (2004) highlighted Australia's diversity, stating that people who live here come from 232 different countries, that we speak 193 different languages, and that indigenous people have lived here for thousands of years. To immigrate, people leave their home countries voluntarily in search of employment or a better future for their children while adjusting to the new country. The geographical, social and cultural issues of having a sense of community are critical in understanding the stories of success and failure amongst those trying to make Australia their new home.

There are also challenges for the receiving community that flows from intercultural and intergroup relations. There are concerns for the existing identity and sense of community on which this is based (Fisher & Sonn, 2002). How these are played out and the extent to which Australia is an accepting or rejecting community can have significant impacts on the social and psychological functioning of both the newcomers and existing population.

Creating settings for belonging

Much research has explored the challenges of and responses to intergroup relations using the notion of acculturation. Acculturation refers to the social and psychological changes to individuals and groups that result because of continuous first hand contact between groups (Berry, 1997). Many have reported the stressful nature of acculturation and immigrant adaptation, and the negative social and psychological health outcomes that may follow (Berry).

The sense of community model (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) has been used to explore the issues of identity and community from the perspective of immigrant groups and the role of sense of community in the settlement process (e.g., Fijac & Sonn, 2004; Sonn & Fisher, 1996, 1998, 2005; Sonn, 2002). Participants reported the

importance of ethnic social settings which link members with broader social structures and provide contexts for developing skills and renegotiating social identities. Shared emotional connection, shared history and experience, and a shared country of origin are central to sense of community for different immigrant groups. Sonn and Fisher (1996) found in research with South African immigrants in Australia that many emphasised maintaining traditions, feeling comfortable with other South Africans, and developing networks with other South Africans. These aspects indicated a sense of familiarity and shared history that was important to remaking identities and community in the Australian context. Importantly, sense of community in that study was related positively to wellbeing as measured by the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg & Williams, 1988).

For Chilean immigrants to Western Australia, common symbols (e.g., language) and shared cultural values (e.g., Familialism) were important aspects of belonging and identification and central to members' participation in settings (see Sonn, 2002). A complex number of factors influenced identity and community for second-generation Pakistani-Muslim women in Western Australia (Fijac & Sonn, 2004). Among other findings they reported that religious affiliation (Islamic Law) was central to belonging and identification and it was often family and their extended community that understood and affirmed these identities.

Common symbols and histories can also become the basis for exclusion. The Pakistani women revealed that markers that served as a source of strength and identity (e.g. the veil) can be the basis for discrimination and racism. Racism and discrimination was particularly evidenced in the desecration of buildings of religious significance in the period following September 11 (Fijac & Sonn, 2004). Aspects of a community were highlighted and used as a dimension for exclusion. This is not the only example where features of communities have been mobilised for exclusionary purposes. In recent times in Australia there has been considerable discussion about the ostensibly exclusionary nature of government responses to refugees and asylum seekers.

The threat of difference

There are different explanations and levels of analysis including those who emphasise levels of racism and the racialisation and 'othering' of ethnic groups (see Hage, 1998). Some have commented about the responses of 'so-called' mainstream Australians to refugees (e.g., Hage, 1998; Pettman, 1992; Vasta, 2000). These authors highlight the growing exclusionary responses and cultural racism that is visible in media representations of Aboriginal people and refugees. Hage argued that there are deeper fantasies of a white Australia rooted in the past that persists and is reflected in 'white' Australian responses to a rapidly changing community.

Fisher and Sonn (2002) used sense of community with a focus on values and symbols to explore how host communities respond to change. This orientation allowed for a different consideration of host community responses to perceived threats to valued symbols. By using this orientation to understand sense of community, it can be argued that the locking up of different groups of refugees in detention centres reflects an extreme response to a perceived threat. The response involves the creation of rigid boundaries that serve to define who can belong and who can't belong to the broader Australian community. The exclusion and detention of asylum seekers has detrimental effects on the wellbeing of those placed in detention centres, while for some sectors of the host community it provides an increased perception of safety. This increased perception of safety is often reflected in statements that justify the detention

of groups of people because, as a person suggested, it only takes one “who is a prospective terrorist, who is going to do what they did in New York” (SBS, Insight, 2005).

The sense of community framework is powerful and has allowed us to understand better the complex process of settlement-adaptation and the central role of internalised cultural and social resources in this process of change. We have been able to look beyond the individual psychological experience of acculturation to the more dynamic process of community and identity making that is part of intergroup relations. Apart from focussing on those who are settling, we have included exploring the responses of the host community, typically the dominant ethnic group.

Indigenous Australians

As with different immigrant communities, issues of community, identity and wellbeing need to be understood in the context of relations of dominance and subjugation. Unlike immigrants, however, Indigenous people have always lived here and continue to experience oppression and colonisation in their own country. Moreton-Robinson (2003) has highlighted the importance of this in stating that:

Indigenous people’s sense of home and place are configured differently to that of migrants. There is no other homeland that provides a point of origin, or place for multiple identities. Instead our rendering of place, home and country through our ontological relation to country is the basis for our ownership (p. 37).

Although there is very little research that has directly applied to a sense of community framework in relation to the experiences of Indigenous Australians, there is writing that have explored the political nature of the term community and how it has been used in the oppression of Indigenous Australians (Dudgeon, Mallard, Oxenham, Fielder, 2002). The term has been reconstructed and imbued with local meanings and ways of being and relating that is informed by the lived experiences of indigenous peoples (Dudgeon et al.). This work is among the literature that points to the relevance of the notion for promoting change and enhancing individual and community wellbeing and liberation.

Some of us (Sonn & Fisher, 2004) have argued that communities that have been excluded and oppressed do not always capitulate and find ways to protect cultural resources that are central to community and identity. These cultural resources are protected and hidden in alternative spaces away from dominant groups and can form the basis for identity in changed circumstances. Glover, Dudgeon and Huygens (2005) wrote that cultural renaissance involves “celebrating survival, taking pride and joy in culture and identity and revitalizing language and cultural practices” (p. 333). For example, Jackamarra and Thorne (1997) have shown that ceremonial sites are of prime spiritual and cultural significance for indigenous people and at the core of identity and community making processes. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report (1997) into the removal of children from their families have shown the devastating effects of oppressive policies on the wellbeing of Indigenous people. This points to the importance of connection to country, reclaiming of language and articulation of indigenous ways of knowing and being as central to resilience, affirmation of identities, and self-determination.

Research shows that children of the stolen generation had significantly more mental health problems than those whose parents had not been removed from their parents (Zubrick et al., 2005). Zubrick et al. also found that the mental health of Aboriginal children was worse in regional centres, like Perth and Geraldton, than in

more remote regions where the Aboriginal communities are living more traditional lives. One reason for these differences could be that the children in the more remote communities have that everyday sense of support and belonging (Sarason, 1974) afforded by traditional community and kinship structures

In relation to Aboriginal schooling, Sarra (2005) has argued for the need to disrupt white Australia's inaccurate perceptions of Aboriginal people and to anchor 'liberatory' activity in the positive perceptions of Aboriginality that is based in Aboriginal histories and lived experiences. The cultural resources that inform the positive perceptions include connection to land, spirituality, and respect for elders. These form the basis for the development of systems and strategies at schools aimed at reinforcing positive Aboriginal identity.

Youth in community

Margaret Mead wrote about the essential role of residential communities in the social development of young people "The neighborhood is the place where children are brought up to become members of their own society. Inevitably, within a neighborhood children ...learn how to adapt themselves to the kind of society into which they are growing" (Mead, 1984, p 3). Research has shown further that sense of community is related to many aspects of adolescents' well-being (Pretty, Andrewes & Collett, 1994; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler & Williams, 1996).

More recently large-scale studies demonstrate the significant relationships between neighbourhood characteristics and positive outcomes for young people. These include macro-level factors of socioeconomic, institutional and physical environment, as well as social and cultural environment. Outcomes for youth are related to education, health risk behaviours, social integration and mental and physical health (see Boardman & Onge, 2005 for a review). However, as Pretty (2002) has noted, we still have much to learn about how young people navigate their way through everyday experiences in their residential community, and how such experiences impact on their social needs for community identity and belonging.

When we have asked young people questions about community, they have responded with considerable insight and opinion about their neighbourhoods, and the larger physical and political communities in which these neighbourhoods are embedded. Hundreds of interviews with high school students in regional southeast Queensland (Chipuer et al., 1999) as well as with primary school children in Western Australia (Pooley, Pike, Drew & Breen, 2002), indicate an understanding of belonging and support within neighbourhoods, characteristics of good neighbourhoods, and sensitivity toward the quality of built and natural environments. Furthermore, the inclusiveness of this awareness is evident not only across developmental stages from nine to nineteen years, but also amongst youth with intellectual disabilities who are often positioned as 'clients' of community integration program (Pretty, Rapley & Bramston, 2002).

Within rural and regional Australia, youth are seen as a critical primary resource in contemplating the 'sustainability crisis'. Young people maintain a community's identity ensuring its links with the community's history. They also sustain a community's economic future, injecting their energy and ideas (Lockie & Bourke, 2001). Much of the research in rural youth emigration to the major cities has focussed on what is called structural disadvantage, particularly education and employment. Several strategies have attempted to deal with this, including supporting young people 'boarding' at schools in urban centres. As Laurent (2003) has described, these young people continue to maintain a strong identity with their home community

throughout their boarding school experiences. However, most do not return. Higher education and employment opportunities ultimately influence their migration decisions (Eversole, 2002).

Research is indicating that community characteristics, such as sense of community, can further moderate the effects of structural disadvantage that leads to rural youth migration. For example, findings from over 3,000 Queensland youth who lived in communities smaller than 8,000 people showed community relationship factors accounted for 19% more of the variability in intention to stay than did indicators of structural disadvantage alone (Pretty, Bramston, Patrick & Pannach, 2006). Similarly Pretty, Chipuer and Bramston (2003) reported the relevance of community sentiment, place attachment and sense of community, to the intentions of youth to stay in their rural Australian towns after completing their education.

However, indicators of youth's sense of their community is central for the sustainability of all communities, given how much we will be depending these young citizens as members of the 'social coalition' society. Recent research supports this concern. Of 500 young people surveyed from Victoria, da Silva, Sanson, Smart & Toumbourou (2004) reported one in five adolescents participated in behaviours indicative of civic responsibility. Less than one in ten actively participated in political oriented behaviour, although there were positive levels of social awareness. Pretty (2004) looked more broadly at pro-social behaviour to include informal, everyday occurrences of helping people outside of the familial context. She reported 50% of 2,130 adolescents from the Darling Downs region of Queensland indicated instances of such behaviour. Pretty found Australian youth are greatly influenced by adult mentors, in addition to parents, who are active in community work.

Some time ago, Edelson and O'Neil (1966) concluded, in the first exploration of political awareness related to adolescents' sense of community, that young people find it difficult to conceive of community as a whole and, therefore, lack abilities to contemplate the importance and consequences of civic responsibility. If some still hold that opinion, evidence from da Silva et al. (2004) suggests otherwise. They found 50% of their participants would participate in volunteer and political activities if more opportunities existed. As Omoto and Snyder (2002) suggest, sense of community is an integral factor in encouraging and maintaining support, and an attitude of responsibility, towards those we do not know personally. For these reasons, youths' sense of community should be on the agenda of all local civic councils. Indeed, Australia is increasingly challenged to attend to its young people more as "a resource rather than a problem" (Dadich, 2002).

Conclusion

Sense of community offers an organising principle for research and practice in various areas such as community development, social capital, service provision, self help groups, and prevention and resilience in mental health interventions. Sense of community has been operationalised as a state like entity, and as the outcome of certain social processes. As such, a conceptual framework as been developed that allows understanding of the way people are socialised into their communities and maintain, or fail to establish and maintain, social engagement. This has also been understood in terms of process analysis of social change. Its linkage to power is important, as it helps define the setting in which power is used and is less likely to be abused.

From a process perspective, sense of community is a changing feature of people's relationships to others, and as such can be a barometer of change in

community. It can be beneficial in helping people create a sense of identity and a resilience to untoward social change. As a central aspect of the development and maintenance of social connectedness, it is useful in conceptualising adaptive and protective factors for positive life in community.

Sense of community can also be associated with negative aspects of social life. The nature of exclusion of 'others' can lead to harmful social consequences. Local social cohesiveness can be at the expense of minority groups and newly arrived immigrant groups. It can provide an analytic tool that allows us to see the positive and negative aspects of social structuring and power use. Sense of community can be used as political currency in the form of social capital which can be traded for financial capital. However, this can set out a blaming the victim scenario as communities are empowered to take responsibility for the management of scarce social and economic resources.

We have attempted to show that sense of community has no boundaries or limitations in terms of lifespan development, intellectual or physical abilities, cultures, languages, social economic status, population density or geographic location. Hence, its presence in discourses of the professional, lay person and politician has no limitations. It, therefore, comes within the purview of psychology as a critically thinking discipline that espouses sense of community as a value and philosophy, to mind the sense with which people develop, engage and use their communities.

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