

# PARADOXES, PARABLES AND CONUNDRUMS: A NEW SENSE OF COMMUNITY?

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## Abstract

Research into the psychological sense of community has been characterized as largely being based on an idealized form of community (Dunham, 1986). Community has been seen in terms of functionalist perspective with few researchers looking at the conflicts and tension of community living. There has been little critical analysis of what community is and what our sense of it is. A series of parables, paradoxes and conundrums are presented to raise the questions of what we are dealing with when we look at people's psychological sense of community. We speculate, even pontificate, about the some of the issues that we suggest may help in a more critical examination of the concept and role of sense of community.

Running head: Parables, paradoxes and conundrums of sense of community

The research on the psychological sense of community (SOC) in community psychology has

been largely positivistic and not particularly instructive. It has been reflective of the demands and constraints placed upon researchers than on the substantive domain itself (as in Wicker's, 1989, notions of substantive theorizing). Sarason (1974) saw sense of community as the foundation of community psychology. This has yet to be realised, and we would argue that the concept has not been well articulated (as others have, e.g., Dunham, 1977, 1986; Hunter & Riger, 1986; Weisenfeld, 1986). In this paper we raise a number of issues related to sense of community and then offer some comments on where we would see the field developing. Our observations are offered as reflections on the domain and as 'seeding thoughts'. Polkinghorne (1983) advocated the concept of 'assertoric knowledge' in which knowledge claims are 'asserted', or put in the public domain for critical comment. We hope we have not taken too much license with his notions of the promotion of the 'human sciences' in our assertions. In keeping with the religious references in our names, we felt the inclusion of some parables was appropriate.

#### Parable #1

These parables are too short to be realistic. Our poetic license has been used to cut to the chase of the parable. Parables are metaphorical stories designed to let us know how to lead our lives. We have short-circuited the story and cut to the punch line.

Sarason (1982) wrote:

If anybody asked me wherein my thinking had any distinctiveness, I would say it was in taking the obvious seriously. American psychology has had trouble recognising the obvious, perhaps because so much attention has been given to the distractions of theory.  
(p. 234)

We need to take the obvious seriously, as community is obvious, so obvious that we have difficulty seeing it. In a novel by Douglas Adams (1988), he tells a story of the intersection of the Norse gods and modern humans. The worlds of the gods and humans run in parallel, and differ by only a small part of a degree, which, by and large, makes the world of the gods invisible to us. Adams tells us that if you turn quickly enough, it is possible to get a glimpse of their world. We would argue that Adams has provided a metaphor for understanding society and community through the examination of these small differences. Thus we need to look at SOC in

its obvious manifestations, but to do this is not so simple. Some of the following may offer some directions of how this can be undertaken.

#### Parable #2

Reiff (1966) made the point that the use of the medical model for mental health was inappropriate. His argument was not based on an analysis of the politics of aligning ourselves with the health sector. Rather he pointed out that physical ill-health is defined by abnormality; high blood pressure, elevated temperatures, medical equipment that goes ‘ping-ping’ rather than just ‘ping’. We know you are healthy because of the absence of abnormal symptoms. Physical health is then defined in terms of normality. On the other hand, mental ill-health is defined in terms of DSM IV symptomology. We know when you are mad because you have abnormal symptoms, but not when you are sane. We do not know what mental healthiness is. While the concept of wellness has been developed recently (e.g., Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2000), it still presents problems in deciding what aspects of human functioning lead to wellness. Reiff’s comments are equally applicable to SOC. We have no conceptualisation of what the ‘good community’ is. We do know what unhealthy communities are by the presence of people with low or no existent SOC.

Similarly, Sarason (1986) commented that SOC is something we don’t know we have, but very well know when we haven’t. As Joni Mitchell sang, “you don’t know what you’ve got, ‘till it’s gone”. More importantly, the slow ebb of our collective SOC is not easily recognised. Sarason pointed to the increase in mobilisation of American society as potentially one of the worst impacts on wellbeing. The loss of community that has arisen by increased mobility can be seen in increases in mental health problems and may be seen in the increased levels of depression in the Western societies.

#### Paradox #1

The traditional approach to SOC has met with only small gains in understanding. The positivistic approach to the study of SOC has considerable limitations. Psychology has been slow to respond to the commentaries of people like Cronbach (1957, 1975), Hollway and Jefferson (2000), Polkinghorne (1983), Sarason, (1981), and Smith, Harré and van Langenhove (1995) who

warned of the inadequacies of the application of hard science methodology to psychology (we even got the wrong model, according to physicist and ‘father of the atom bomb’, Robert Oppenheimer, 1956). The thrust of these arguments was that experimentation alone does not provide ecologically valid understandings of phenomena. Coronach, for example, called for a mix of methods to give both a broad and in depth views of human action. Ironically, the pragmatists had warned us about these issues over a century ago. The re-emergence of phenomenology and other qualitative methodology has signalled the need for a contextualist approach in psychology, especially, community psychology. (It is interesting to observe how slow the rise of contextual research has been in community psychology, even with ecological principles being at the heart of the discipline).

Positivistic methodologies bring a restricted view of the objects of concern. The correlational methodology that predominates SOC research has the problems of positivistic research and some further conceptual problems. Sense of community relates to our place in local communities (or relational communities; we have not contemplated how SOC will be defined in terms of post-modern communities, as described by Newbrough, 1992). Those who have a sense of community are part of that community. The quantitative methods of measuring SOC have taken a qualitative aspect of human life and made it an individual differences measure. What does it mean to have a lesser sense of community than someone else in that community? Correlational research necessarily involves only those who have a sense of community. For those who do not, the concept does not make sense. To assess SOC quantitatively there must be an identifiable community. In locational communities, it is possible to ask someone without a SOC questions about SOC and get meaningful responses. In relational communities, the process is more difficult. Chavis, Hogge, McMillan and Wandersman (1986), or Buckner’s (1988) scales, for example, do not cater for the ‘Not applicable’ response. These scales are only meaningful to those who have at least some modicum of SOC. Those who are alienated are qualitatively different from those who score low on a SOC scale.

Individual differences research (correlational research) can only measure the relationships between SOC and other variables, such as wellbeing. The typical question that can be addressed is whether people who have a stronger sense of community have higher levels of well being, for

example. It can address issues such as the impact of declining levels of SOC (possibly). What it does not address, nor can it, is the impact of the loss of a sense of community or being alienated. Individual differences research can only address relative differences in SOC, not the presence or absence of SOC.

The study of SOC needs to be more exploratory and qualitative. We need to have a conceptual grasp of what SOC is in relational and locational communities, and this requires some basic descriptive and interpretive qualitative research. Even more pressing is to begin to understand what the impacts of postmodern conceptualisations of community (e.g., Newbrough, 1992) will have on the way we approach SOC.

#### Paradox #2

Grace Pretty presented a paper at the Australian and New Zealand Community Psychological Conference in Melbourne in 2001 conceptualising sense of place, place attachment and sense of community. It is instructive to recognise that these concepts are rarely looked within the one research design (Puddifoot, 1994, is an exception), and that the concepts appear in different literatures. Sense of place occurs in environmental psychology, human geography, planning and sociology. Sense of community is largely seen in community psychology journals. Why is there this failure to integrate the concepts? Some cultural work may be helpful.

The second author has been studying mental health service delivery to Aboriginal communities. One of the key findings has been that Aboriginal mental health is related to place. There is some evidence that emotional wellbeing is related to contact with the land. The extent of mental ill health seems to be correlated with the distance from the person's land. Connection to land is very important for the maintenance of wellbeing. The implications appear that for traditional Aboriginal sense of place (SOP) and sense of community (SOC) are not conceptually separated; community and the land are integrally related Dudgeon, Mallard, Oxenham and Fielder (2002).

Why do SOP and SOC seem so tightly related in some cultures and so easily separated in the non-Indigenous society? The failure to recognise and deal with this separation indicates that conceptualisation of the concept of SOC may have problems. Does it reflect that in a mobile

society, sense of place has lost its connection to community, or does it reflect a collective denial that mobility has impacted on the strength of sense of community? Have we convinced ourselves that modern communities can be created and modified in short periods of time? Does this indicate that we have not grasped the concept effectively? In response to a question from Bob Newbrough at the Yale biennial community psychology conference, Seymour Sarason said the reason why he saw SOC as being so important was that he had experienced times during the great depression when there was no one that he could rely on to help him survive. The extent of the economic situation meant that his (and his family's) survival was at real risk. This sense of that alienation needs to be at the heart of our considerations of SOC.

When visiting New Zealand a few years ago, the first author visited a cave renowned for fire flies. This cave was reported to have been discovered centuries before when a Maori woman had sought a hiding place there. This woman had run away from her tribe and entered another tribe's land. She was afraid she would be enslaved or worse, so she took refuge in the cave. She would emerge at night and either find or steal food. She survived to quite an old age before she was discovered and looked after by the locals. The story indicates the strength of community and the social regulations in her tribe and the extent to which banishment impacted upon people. When we talk of the loss of SOC, these are the kind of people we need to consider.

We need to look at community and SOC in a variety of cultural contexts rather than only from a white, middle class perspective, and to attempt to understand how SOP, place attachment and SOC are interrelated.

### Paradox #3

From our work in rural communities we come across strong communities. They will quickly tell you of the collective and caring exploits of the community, such as building a swimming pool when government would not provide the funds, and supporting the local hospital and school, both financially and in terms of human resources. In one community we were told that when there was a bereavement or someone is seriously ill, the community would provide support to the family with meals and other assistance. This is done with little planning, or the expectation of thanks. It is just part of rural life. It is part of the interrelationship and expectations. Yet if a

family fails as farmers, if the farm is no longer financially viable, the people walk away with little apparent sympathy or obvious support. Why are there aspects of rural community life where compassion and aid is immediate, yet there are other aspects where this is not apparent? What does this mean in terms of community? Does it reflect that community and sense of community have both positive and negative aspects?

#### Paradox #4

Assessing community resilience was an important part of the Regional Forestry Agreement process in Australia. Social assessment was a part of the process of developing state and federal governments to agree on the setting aside of forest to 'maintain a sustainable environment'. One of the comments that came out of this process was that only a short period of time was required in a community to get a strong sense of the strength of the community. As part of her PhD research, Coakes (1995) noted that quantitatively measured SOC seemed to be negatively related to participant observations of a number of rural communities. The first author and Coakes rated the six communities. These ratings were negatively correlated with aggregate SOC scores. Thus we seemed to be attending to different aspects of community than what the scale measures (see Bishop, Coakes & D'Rozario, 2002). Again, this suggests that we need to take a broader approach to the concepts of community and SOC. Cultural and location variations need to be understood using a variety of methodologies that may provide a fuller understanding of community and SOC.

#### Paradox #5

The concept of community is layered (Brodsky & Marx, 2001) and the way in which you address it determines its apparent nature. For example, if you ask residents of a particular community, there will always be some other sector of the community that they see as the out group. These can be located geographically. In Perth, residents of suburbs north of the river are seen as being different from those south of the river. But these out group differences diminish when we compare ourselves to those of other states, and when we, as a nation compare ourselves to New Zealanders or Americans. The sense of 'we-ness' changes with the way the questions are framed. Is this a psychological example of Heizenberg's uncertainty principle?

### Conundrum #1

Sense of community is a concept that relates to how we interact with our communities and the psychological sequela of our involvement. Community is obviously central to this. Yet there has been little written in community psychology on this topic. Hilery (1964) reported 94 definitions of community in sociology, yet community psychologists have been relatively mute. Dokecki (1996), Heller (1989), Hunter and Riger (1986) and Newbrough (1992, 1995) are notable exceptions. Newbrough (1992, 1995) has written of the 'third position' community. He argues that the *Gemeinschaft* (which we tend to assume is the basis for SOC) and the *Gesellschaft* society do not reflect the communities we have in the postmodern first world. The 'third position' community a complex mix of social structures and local communities. The conundrum here is how can we conceptualise SOC without a thorough understanding of community.

### Conundrum #2

The experience of SOC is not peripheral to living in community, yet we see it only at the margins. In the novel by Douglas Adams (1988) referred to above, about the intersection of the Norse gods and modern humans, he described a violent episode where an attendant Heathrow airport disappears in an explosion. He wrote that the event was a mystery to humans, but to Odin the event had Thor written on it in letters so large that only another god could see. The analogy here is that SOC is visible at the margins and yet it is written so large that we fail to recognise it. It is so obvious as to be invisible.

### Paradox #6

Lizzie Finn, a PhD student at Curtin is currently working with GROW, a mental health self help group. She has found that the Alcoholics Anonymous type of structured meetings takes people who are lonely and isolated and creates a sense of belonging, and improves social skills. Through GROW's advocacy work, these people are then linked back into the broader community. An important aspect of this process is what she referred to as the 'educated heart'. It seems that GROW supports the participants to regain a sense of who they are, and a sense of community through acceptance and love. It appears that a person's sense of community is damaged by the experience of an episode of mental illness and the attendant stigma. The GROW program seems to have some positive impacts on the psychiatric or psychology illness. GROW's



effects may be more significant on the social aspects of mental ill-health (alienation and stigma) through the process of restoring people's sense of community. We can speculate that the importance of SOC is that it may be a buffer to the social impacts of mental ill-health, rather than the mental health, *per se*. Thus, where a community is able to maintain SOC for its members suffering from mental health problems, the nature of the expression of those problems may become less severe. The failure of the maintenance of SOC for those with mental health problems or intellectual disabilities maybe the key to the failure of the deinstitutionalisation policies (Warner, 1989).

In summary, the parables, paradoxes and conundrums presented above indicate that the concept of SOC is more complicated than that presented by McMillan and Chavis (1986). The positive *Gemeinschaft* community that is implicit in much SOC research need to be seen as somewhat unrealistic and not reflecting on the costs and benefits of community life (Dunham, 1986). The nature of community needs to be understood before we move to SOC. Part of that understanding requires investigating communities in a variety of locations and cultures.

Where to

These paradox and conundrums present issues that we would suggest need examination in conceptualising sense of community. It is not an exhaustive list and others should add to the list. There seems some central issues is that need to be addressed in the shorter term. We would suggest that the following four, related points of departure.

1. We need to concentrate on the obvious aspects of sense of community. This can be done in the short term through the eyes of the disadvantaged. Just as optical illusions have been used to understand normal perception, the experiences of the marginalised and disadvantaged could help with understanding the concept of sense of community.
2. It is those who are denied connection with community that we need to work with and for. Sarason (1974) saw the lack of a SOC as psychologically devastating, and that the remediation and promotion of SOC should be a core principle of community psychology.

3. Sense of community is (arguably) the central aspect of the socially constructed aspects of mental health (e.g., stigma). The social ramifications of having a mental health problem present issues that are somewhat independent of the experience of the illness itself. Sense of community is a key to understanding these social issues.
4. The investigation of SOC needs to be preceded with, or be accompanied by, the study of the postmodern community. Community also needs to be studied in a variety of different contexts. Community needs to be understood in its diversity and people's sense of these diverse communities needs also to be understood.

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