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# Building Community Via Sport for Adolescents

Stacy Warner  
Stephen Leierer

## Abstract

Sport is frequently claimed to foster a greater sense of community for participants. However, a dearth of quantifiable and empirical evidence supports this claim and even less is known about how sport impacts adolescents' sense of community. The aim of this research was to assess the effectiveness of a sport program for adolescents. A pre/post research design was used to determine if any changes in sense of community were experienced for adolescents who took part in a three-week sport program. Sense of community was measured using the Sense of Community Index-2. A total of 28 participants completed pre- and postsurveys. These data were analyzed and the findings indicated that significant increases in adolescents' sense of community were observed. An analysis of the survey subscales revealed that the adolescent program participants in the study experienced significant increases related to Reinforcement of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connections. This study helps lay the foundation for better understanding of how sport can help build a sense of community for adolescents.

**Keywords:** *Community building, sense of community, adolescents, participatory sport, community*

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Sport is often considered a means to enhance or build community. In fact, “community development” is frequently considered one of the major justifications of sport (Chalip, 2006a). Historically, sport management literature has focused on community development in terms of its economic impact; however, a growing number of scholars have begun to consider community development in noneconomic terms. For example, scholars have explored sporting events and programming as a means of creating social capital (Misener & Mason, 2006; Ziakas & Costa, 2010), liminality and *communitas* (Chalip, 2006b), civic pride (Wood, 2006), social change (Green, 2008; Sparvero & Chalip, 2007), and a sense of community (Clopton, 2008; Warner & Dixon, 2011; Warner, Dixon, & Leierer, 2015).

Of these potential social impacts of sport, the most pertinent to adolescents is likely its perceived ability to foster a sense of community (e.g., Mayberry, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Pretty, 2002; Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994; Pretty et al., 1996). Sense of community is defined as a community characteristic that leads to its members feeling a sense of belonging and a sense that support is available at the group level (Sarason, 1974). The adolescent development literature clearly supports that adolescents benefit in a multitude of ways from experiencing a sense of community and being involved in community activities (e.g., Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999; Evans, 2007; Maton, 1990; Pretty, 2002). This literature highlights how active participation (Shaw, 1976) and nonparental supportive adults (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997) play a key role in fostering a greater sense of community and thereby the development of adolescents.

Considering these benefits, it is not surprising that many sport-related schemes for adolescents (e.g., events, programs, clinics, etc.) have been positioned as being beneficial to the community through fostering a greater sense of community (cf. Chalip, 2006a; Green, 2008; Schimmel, 2003). Numerous sport-related schemes have been and continue to be developed all over the world to address issues related to crime, delinquency, and substance abuse (e.g., Crabbe, 2000; Hartmann, 2001, 2003; Smith & Waddington, 2004). In most cases, sport is used as a diversionary tactic or hook to educate and build relationships with adolescents (Green, 2008; Hartmann & Depro, 2006). While both long-term programs and more short-term events are well intentioned in their efforts to address various social issues, a lack of evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of these programs, thus limiting our perspective on the value of sport (cf. Chalip, 2006a; Green, 2008; Long & Sanderson, 2001; Mulvey, Arthur, & Reppucci, 1993; Smith & Waddington, 2004).

Further, some scholars have even suggested that such sport programs and events can have unintended negative consequences if these activities are not managed properly (e.g., Deery & Jago, 2010; Green, 2008; Hartmann & Depro, 2006; Kleiber & Roberts, 1981). For example, Kleiber and Roberts (1981) asserted that rather than promoting prosocial behaviors, sport actually delays such behaviors among adolescents. Scholars have also reported a link between sport participation and increased delinquency rates (e.g., Begg et al., 1996; Kreager, 2007; Snyder,

1994) and increased alcohol consumption (e.g., Lorente et al., 2004; Rainey et al., 1996; Wichstrom & Wichstrom, 2009). Sport may indeed be a promising way to positively impact adolescents, but it is not always effective, and in some cases can even be counterproductive. The literature points, though, to more positive outcomes being achieved if sport programs foster a sense of community.

Consequently, in order to overcome these negative outcomes and better understand the role that sport can have on individuals and communities, it is necessary to first assess if sport can actually foster community and how this process occurs. Although recent scholars have advanced our understanding of the social benefits of sport for adults (e.g., Berg, Warner, & Das, 2014; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Swyers, 2010), a notable gap in the literature still exists regarding changes in reported sense of community levels as a result of community-based sport. Despite the growth of short-term sport programs (cf., Bowers, Chalip, & Green, 2011), this gap is even more pronounced as it relates to the social impact of short-term sport programs on adolescents and the advantages and disadvantages of such programs. Further, approximately 90% of the research conducted regarding community excludes participants under the age of 18 (Pretty, 2002). Thus, the aim of this research is to help address this gap by assessing sense of community levels of adolescents before and after a short-term sport program.

### **Sense of Community**

Originating from the community psychology field, sense of community is considered an essential and malleable component to fostering individual and group well-being (Bess et al., 2002; Hill, 1996; Sarason, 1974). Chavis and colleagues (1986) defined sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met by their commitment to be together” (p. 11). While the community psychology literature has highlighted the importance of developing a sense of community in geographical neighborhoods, more contemporary work in this field has been focused on creating a sense of community in educational settings and/or communities of interest (Warner, 2012). For example, studies on sense of community have been conducted on college campuses (DeNeui, 2003; Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996), within virtual communities (Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002a, 2002b), and in work settings (Burroughs & Eby, 1998).

A majority of the research on sense of community is grounded in McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) Sense of Community Theory, which is frequently cited as the most widely used and accepted theory within the community psychology field (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002; Hill, 1996). This theory put forth that sense of community is comprised of four factors: membership, influence, sharing of values with an integration and fulfillment of needs (i.e., reinforcement of needs), and shared emotional connections. Membership involves the creation of boundaries through use of language, dress, or ritual to indicate who belongs and who does not, the fostering of emotional safety or security, and sense

of belonging and identification. Influence is a bidirectional component in that members must feel that they have the ability to exert some influence on the group, yet the group must also exert influence on its members in order for cohesion to exist. In his later work, McMillan (1996) emphasized that trust is also an essential element of influence. Sharing of values focuses on the reinforcement of values received as a result of belonging to a community. In other words, members are attracted to groups that benefit them in some way or fulfill a need. Shared emotional connections are grounded in the idea that members identify with a shared history of the community or common experience. In summary, McMillan and Chavis' (1986) work demonstrated that sense of community is multifaceted, and various sites (i.e., groups, programs) could be used to foster a sense of community.

Adolescents' benefits of experiencing a sense of community. While sense of community research has a long and well-established history that demonstrates its link to numerous life quality-enhancing benefits for adults (e.g., Bachrach & Zautra, 1985; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Davidson & Cotter, 1991), more recent research has established sense of community to be an important factor in adolescents' lives, as well. Studies among adolescents have found that a greater sense of community is associated with decreased levels of loneliness (Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994), reduced substance abuse (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Mayberry, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009), reduced delinquency (Battistich & Hom, 1997), improved well being (i.e., greater happiness and less worry) (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007; Pretty et al., 1996), and increased prosocial civic engagement (e.g., charity events) (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007). In sum, it is clear that a strong sense of community is a vital component to the overall life quality of adolescents. Consequently, finding ways to enhance the sense of community experienced by adolescents should be a high priority for those concerned with improving a neighborhood or community.

**Sport as a tool to foster a sense of community.** While an abundance of literature focused on sport and social cohesion exists (e.g., Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002; Warner, Bowers, & Dixon, 2012), a nascent line of research has posited that sport can be utilized as a tool to foster a sense of community among adults through the four dimensions outlined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). While social cohesion and sense of community are conceptually related, social cohesion tends to focus more on the individual and dyad levels, whereas sense of community focuses more on community characteristics and the environmental level. That is, sense of community tends to focus on the environment and its atmosphere rather than individual relationships. Warner and Dixon's (2011, 2013) qualitative research concluded that being a part of a sports team could enhance a sense of community for participants. Thus, preliminary evidence suggests that active sport participation can foster increases in a sense of community (Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013; Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012). This evidence though is limited to adults who had long durations of exposure to the sporting environment,

which fostered the sense of community. In other words, the participants were a part of team or regularly engaged in a sport activity over long periods of time (i.e., one or more years).

Clopton (2008, 2009), Fairley and Tyler (2012), and Swyers (2010) all concluded that the more passive sport spectatorship could also create a sense of community among adult fans. In these studies, a sense of community was fostered when a specific university or professional team served as a point of identification or membership, the team events provided an environment where individuals had influence, individuals' needs were met during these events, and shared emotional connections were experienced. Interestingly, Warner and colleagues (2011) found that sport spectatorship did not foster a greater sense of community over one football season. Presumably, one season was not enough to reinforce needs and create an environment where fans felt they had influence or could create strong enough emotional and social connections. The authors concluded that greater exposure to and more active engagement with the community were needed to foster an increased sense of community for fans. Thus, although sustained participation in sport seems suitable for fostering a sense of community, the efficacy of short-term experiences for such an end remains unclear. In an effort to better understand how sport can influence a sense of community, the aim of this study is to empirically evaluate the impact of a short-term participatory sport program on adolescents' sense of community. Adolescents were specifically targeted because they make up a large portion of the sport sector, and yet are an understudied population in sport (Coakley, 2009). The guiding research question for this inquiry is: Can a short-term sport program increase levels of sense of community for adolescents? And if so, what mechanisms (i.e., reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connections) contribute the most to this change?

## Methodology

**Research setting.** This research study took place in a large city in central Texas and was focused around a no-cost sport program for adolescents. The participatory event was sponsored by a nonprofit organization whose mission is to use sport to positively impact the community. The sport organization has only been in existence since 2009; however, it is affiliated with a larger citywide nonprofit network. This larger network or community anchor provides much of the structural support for the sport organization. In the summer of 2011, the sport organization offered a free sports program for adolescents in the community. The program was held in the evenings for three hours, Mondays through Thursdays for three weeks, and offered volleyball, football, soccer, and basketball. A total of 52 participants (28 males; 24 females) with an average age of 15.7 completed the program.

**Procedure.** After University IRB approval was received, prior to beginning the sport program, parent-child consent forms to participate in the research were distributed and collected from parents. The pre- and postsurveys consisted of de-

mographic questions and the 24-item Sense of Community Index-2 (SCI-2). After parental consent was obtained, the respective adolescents were asked to voluntarily participate in the study and were made aware that volunteering to be in the study would not influence their participation in the program in any way. In order to assess the community impact of a three-week sport program on adolescents, a pre/post survey design was used. The presurveys were administered to the adolescent participants immediately prior to the start of the three-week program. The post-surveys were then administered at the conclusion of the program. The surveys were administered in a way that provided anonymity for the participants.

**Participants.** Of the 52 active participants that completed the program, 28 adolescents returned completed and usable pre- and postsurveys ( $n = 56$  observations). Although, the intent was to survey all of the participants transportation, time constraints, obtaining parental-child consent, and time of the year (i.e., summer, family vacation) prohibited some participants from fully completing both the pre- and posttest. The sample did, however, represented about 53.8% of the total participants that completed the program. Assuming a medium effect size .35, an exploratory alpha level of  $p < .10$  (Rinne & Mazzoco, 2013), a  $G^*$  power analysis for repeated measures ANOVA determined that approximately 27 participants were needed to obtain power of .80 ( $G^*$ Power, 2014; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). We were able to evaluate 28 participants.

The sample consisted of 14 males and 14 females; the average age of the participants in the sample was 15.3 years old. The sample was reflective of the age and gender make-up of entire group of adolescents that took part in the three-week program.

**Instrument.** McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory was operationalized into the Sense of Community Index (Chavis et al., 1986). Chipuer and Pretty (1999) reported the broad use of the Sense of Community Index across a variety of disciplines and further promoted its use, predominantly due to its strong theoretical basis (i.e., McMillan and Chavis' Theory). This original Sense of Community Index consisted of 12 true/false items. Although it was recognized as a valid measurement instrument, it was revised into the Sense of Community Index-2 (SCI-2) to better capture McMillan and Chavis' theory through the use of more reliable subscales (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008). The resulting SCI-2 is a 24-item (6 items per subscale) survey that utilizes a Likert-type scale. Previous research with an adult population (see Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008) has demonstrated that the SCI-2 is a very reliable instrument (coefficient alpha=.94) to quantitatively measure sense of community. Consequently, its four subscales consisting of six items each related to Reinforcement of Needs (e.g., "Being a member of this community makes me feel good."), Membership (e.g., "Most community members know me."), Influence (e.g., "Fitting into this community is important to me."), and Shared Emotional Connections (e.g., "Members of this community care about each other.") also have been found to be reliable with coefficient alphas ranging between .79

to .86 (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008). Each subscale score is calculated by adding the six items together. The overall SCI-2 is then calculated by adding all 24 items together. Since previous sense of community work typically only involves adult population (see Pretty, 2002), reliability Cronbach's alphas were calculated for the SCI-2 and its subscales. The total SCI-2 had a reliability of .97 for pretest and .98 for the posttest. The subscales were also found to be highly reliable with coefficient alphas ranging between .88 to .93 for both the pretest and posttest subscales. In addition, the pre- and postsurveys consisted of basic demographic questions and then the 24-item SCI-2.

## Results

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the adolescents' sense of community levels before and after the three-week participatory sport program. First, the total SCI-2 scores for the pretest and posttest were summed and compared. The posttest score ( $M = 82.46$ ,  $SD = 15.62$ ) was eight points higher than the pretest score ( $M = 74.64$ ,  $SD = 17.38$ ). This improvement in overall sense of community was significant [ $F(1,27) = 5.07$ ,  $p = .033$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .16$ ]. Thus, the results suggest that the short-term (three-week) sport program for adolescents had a significant influence on their sense of community.

Because a significant difference was found on the total Sense of Community scale, follow-up one-way repeated measures ANOVA were conducted on the four SCI-2 subscales. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics on the pre- and post-survey. From pretest to the posttest three weeks later, increases in scores on all four subscales occurred. With alpha of  $< .10$ , the increase of each scale scores was significant. That is, significant differences were found from pretest to posttest on

**Table 1**  
*Pre- and Postsurvey Descriptives*

	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Reinforcement of Needs	18.57	4.41	20.39	4.25
Membership	18.64	4.73	20.71	4.07
Influence	18.54	4.73	20.64	3.92
Shared Emotional Connections	18.89	4.96	20.71	3.94
Total Sense of Community (SCI-2)	74.64	17.38	82.46	15.64



Reinforcement of Needs [ $F(1, 27) = 4.45, p = .04, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .14$ ], Membership [ $F(1, 27) = 4.45, p = .04, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .14$ ], Influence [ $F(1, 27) = 5.34, p = .03, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .16$ ], and Shared Emotions [ $F(1, 27) = 3.17, p = .09, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .10$ ]. The SCI-2 detected significant changes related to adolescent sport participants' overall sense of community and more specifically, feelings related to Reinforcement of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connections.

## Discussion

The results demonstrated that adolescents in a small community-based sport program reported increases in their level of sense of community over the course of a three-week program. Consequently, this study contributes to the sport management and community literature in three important ways. First, sport has been consistently used to address various social issues and promote prosocial behaviors, yet there is paucity of data that support its effectiveness (c.f., Green, 2008; Hartmann, 2003; Mulvey, Arthur, & Reppucci 1993; Smith & Waddington, 2004). This study empirically demonstrated an important contribution and benefit of sport—to foster a greater sense of community. Considering the various social impacts associated with a greater sense of community for adolescents (e.g., lower drug abuse, less delinquency, and increases in civic engagement), this study demonstrated the potential value of sport participation in a quantifiable and measurable way (cf. Long & Sanderson, 2001). While it is evident that how the sport is managed is fundamental to achieving the desired outcomes (cf. Chalip, 2006a, 2006b; Chalip, Thomas, & Voyle, 1996; Green, 2008; Warner & Dixon, 2011), it is clear that the three-week program was managed in a way that reinforced adolescents' needs and provided them with a place they felt that they belonged, had influence, and shared emotions connections. Thus, this study provides empirical evidence that a three-week sport program can enhance a sense of community for adolescents through reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connection.

The second major contribution of this study is that it focused on an understudied population in relation to sport and community development. Despite the growing attention that has been placed on the potential social impacts of sport (e.g., Girginov & Hills, 2008; Sparvero & Chalip, 2010; Warner et al., 2011), the vast majority of current research primarily has involved adult populations. It should be noted that this is also typical of community studies; Pretty (2002) estimates that 90% of the research conducted on communities exclude participants under the age of 18. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by advancing our understanding of how adolescents can benefit from sport and community development. What is too often overlooked is that adolescents have influence within families and on family decisions, especially as they relate to leisure activities and events (Darley & Lim, 1986; Turley, 2001). Thus, adolescents are important stakeholders to consider when evaluating the social impacts of sport. This research,

therefore, highlights adolescents as important stakeholders in the community and demonstrates one way that they can be influenced via sport. If we can enhance the sense of community of our adolescents, carryover effects that benefit the wider community would also likely be achieved. After all, a strong sense of community among adolescents has been shown to result in less crime and delinquency, and their increased involvement in civic affairs—all of which benefit the wider community.

The third contribution of this study is that it provides direction for sport managers and marketers concerned with demonstrating the benefits of sport. Although this research focused on a small-scale, community-based participatory sport program, there are practical implications and considerations for all those involved with sport. As sport in general begins facing increased scrutiny for its cost (Crompton, 2008; Sparvero & Chalip, 2007), ecological footprint (see Trendafilova, 2011; Trendafilova & Waller, 2011), and tendency to exacerbate social problems (e.g., Green, 2008; Hartmann, 2001, 2003; Hartmann & Depro, 2006; Kleiber & Roberts, 1981), the need to demonstrate the value and significance of sport is becoming a greater priority (cf. Chalip, 2006). Continuing to measure and assess the psychological and social outcomes, such as sense of community, is one step toward that goal. Short-term, small-scale community-based efforts, such as the one highlighted in this study, can appropriately serve adolescents in a way that is beneficial to the community as a whole. Thus, this exploratory research helps address a noted gap in the literature by empirically demonstrating a social benefit and psychological outcome of sport participation (cf. Chalip, 2006a; Green, 2008; Long & Sanderson, 2001; Smith & Waddington, 2004).

Because this research was field based, there are a few important limitations to acknowledge. First, the participants were adolescents specific to a single sport program, and therefore the sample size was small. This experimental design was advantageous in that the sport program was consistent for the sample, and pre- and postsurveys were collected from over 50% of the participants who completed the program. However, this design also indicates that caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to all sport programs for adolescents. While this exploratory field research is quite promising, future research should continue to explore sense of community within sport settings with larger and more diverse samples (i.e., adult populations, nonurban, etc.) and consider other research designs. That is, the results were based on an urban sport program for youth and cannot be generalized to other populations. Additionally, a qualitative approach may yield more specific insight regarding why the short-term program was successful. In general due to living proximity, adolescents from urban area are more likely than those from rural areas to recognize or even be familiar with one another. While this hopefully would have been captured and accounted for in the pre-post design, it could have been a confounding variable that impacted the results.

The development and use of a more sport-specific sense of community survey may also prove to be beneficial to the management and marketing of sport. While the SCI-2 targeted the adolescents' feelings toward the broad community, a sport-specific instrument might better pinpoint the idiosyncratic sport programmatic features that are and are not working with a program (cf. Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013). Overall, though, the SCI-2 was able to empirically demonstrate the role and impact a sport program could be playing in the larger community for adolescents.

## Conclusion

This research demonstrated the effectiveness of a short-term sport program for adolescents. Perhaps the problem in being able to demonstrate the social benefits of sport (see Long & Sanderson, 2001) in other sport-related intervention and community development programs might be that we are expecting too much of sport in and of itself, and not expecting enough of the individuals and community involved. Assessing levels of sense of community helps narrow that gap. In other words, instead of focusing solely on sport and the sport programming, this research and assessing sense of community specifically, helps shift the focus to assessing the environment that sport helped create. Thereby, this research gives a more accurate picture of the social benefits and psychological outcomes sport participants can obtain. The solution for sport managers and marketers, consequently, might be to focus more on sport and the sporting environments' ability to foster community for all stakeholders. In the words of Hill (1996):

If we can learn what aspects of communities foster a strong psychological sense of community and can learn to increase those aspects, perhaps we will not have to concern ourselves with specific problems and the interventions to deal with them. We could concentrate on forming healthy communities, and rely on the communities to form the healthy individuals. (p. 435)

As demonstrated in this study, short-term sport programs can be a part of the solution to forming healthier communities for adolescents through enhanced levels of sense of community. While this is not a serendipitous outcome of all sport programs, sport managers and marketers can and should design their events and programs with this focus in mind (cf. Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013). This can be achieved by planning and managing sport in ways that consider how to reinforce needs, create opportunities for individuals to identify with other community members, provide an atmosphere where individuals have influence, and offer the opportunity for creating shared emotional connections (see Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013 for an in-depth discussion on how this is achieved in a sport setting). Although this research was limited to a small community-based sport program

and the results are not generalizable beyond the scope of the setting, this research suggests that sport can play a role in positively impacting adolescents through fostering a greater sense of community. And more importantly, that a broader focus on sport and its potential social impacts for adolescents would likely lead to important carryover effects that would result in a healthier community.

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