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Julie Ann Pooley
Edith Cowan University

Lynne Cohen
Edith Cowan University

Lisbeth Pike
Edith Cowan University

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Can sense of community inform social capital?

Julie Ann Pooley, Lynne Cohen, Lisbeth T. Pike

School of Psychology, Edith Cowan University, 100 Joondalup Dve, Joondalup, Perth, WA 6027

Abstract

This paper examines the theoretical linkage between social capital and sense of community through research studies within four contextual areas. Social capital (SC) can be conceptualized as all the interactions between individuals in a community, and has been examined in various groups and communities. Sense of community (SoC) is a psychological construct that we argue is a correlate of social capital. Sense of community reflects the feelings of attachment and belonging that an individual has towards a community. Through qualitative and quantitative research carried out across the lifespan in four communities in Western Australia (i.e., Perth community, adolescent Jewish community, urban and rural communities, and primary school community), this paper utilizes SoC as a framework for investigating ways in which SC may be realized in communities. The significance of this paper highlights the practical application of increasing SC within communities through targeting SoC within individuals.

Although social capital is a construct that has been in existence since the early 1900s and had its origins in economics, it has become a growing part of the discourse in a range of human service and mental health disciplines in the last decade. However, it is a concept that typically is defined differently by each author and used in a range of contexts, as a consequence SC remains a confusing abstraction that is difficult to operationally define or measure. This paper will briefly trace the history of the concept, present a new definition of SC and demonstrate that it may be related to a psychological construct SoC. This paper then explores the utility of SoC in a range of diverse contexts by means of four separate case studies where each case study presents data on participants, analysis, and key findings. Key themes relevant to SoC are identified and discussed for each case study. The paper concludes with a discussion that contends that through the case studies it is possible to demonstrate how SC is related to SoC which can then be used as a framework for investigating ways in which SC can be realized in communities.

Social capital as a term was first utilized in 1916 by Hanifan who described it as those tangible assets that count for most in the daily lives of people: namely, good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit (Winter, 2000). The term has been used by researchers during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in research conducted in a range of settings and systems including education, government, families, business and voluntary organizations.

Contemporary theorists have used the term in a variety of perspectives. For example, Bordieux (1986) was concerned with the ability of social capital to generate economic resources, whereas Coleman (1988) focused on the structure of social relationships, and how they relate to human capital. In contrast Putnam (1993) considered SC in terms of cooperative relationships leading to democracy and membership with civic groups. Recently Winter (2000) has provided a point of consensus among these various perspectives, by noting that each of these authors conceptualizes social capital as networks of quality relations which operate as a resource to collective action, though each applies the concept to understanding social phenomena on different scales (e.g., at the level of individual, communities, and nation states) (Stone, 2000).

Perusal of the literature reveals that there are many other terms that have started to appear in association with the term social capital. Examples of these include family social capital, community capital, and human capital. Many authors nowrefer to social capital in a community or family context, where family social capital is defined as relations among family members especially parent–parent and child–parent relationships; community capital refers to relations among family members and the community; and human capital is defined as changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in newways (Bowes&Hayes, 2001; Pryor, 1998). All the above definitions generally indicate an advantage derived from the use of the term capital and this benefit is characterized as social or cultural.

In Australia the literature on social capital is still in its infancy (Winter, 2000), however three distinct approaches to defining the term have been identified. The first of these is represented by Cox, whose approach has been described as drawing on the work of Putnam, Coleman and Bourdieu (see above). Cox defines social capital as "the factor that allows collective action in the public sphere and for the common good" (1997, p. 2). The second approach captured in the work of Baum (1999) emphasizes a public health focus and critically evaluates definitions of social capital that rely on "healthy, close knit communities." The author suggests that a healthy community does not necessarily imply increased social capital for its residents. She argues that some of the literature on social capital and health presents a romantic view of community and assumes that close knit communities are necessarily healthy. However, 'it is possible that they can be exclusionary and distrustful of outsiders, and may not be healthy for those who are not part of them or those within them who disagree with the majority' (Baum, 1999, p. 2). The third approach by Norton (1998) emphasizes 'social capital as relations between people with an ongoing productive capacity. This definition makes no assumption about how social capital is created or destroyed, or even whether or not it is a good thing' (p. 41).

Clearly there is still confusion as to what is meant by social capital with contemporary definitions often reflecting the bias of the discipline orientation of the authors. In Australia this bias appears to be predominantly sociological. It is also notable that there has been minimal contribution to date by psychologists as to the meaning or utility of the concept. This is an intriguing gap in the literature given that knowledge of systems, people, relationships and interactions is the 'bread and butter' of social psychologists and in particular community psychologists.

Knowledge of communities and how communities operate is the domain of community psychologists, yet there appears to be a dearth of input from this group. Community psychologists can offer insight into how, in what manner, and why individuals relate to systems. These relationships and transactions between people and systems appear to be central to all the contemporary definitions of social capital.

1. A new definition for social capital?

In order to generate our definition of social capital we content analyzed as many definitions of social capital that we could find in the literature. This resulted in the identification of a concept that has three integrated themes: relationships, networks and competencies. By relationships we mean those between individuals (interpersonal) as well as between groups (intra-group). By networks, we mean concepts such as trust (goodwill), reciprocity (interaction), structure (formal and informal), density (size, number, and complexity), and membership of groups. Competencies refer to the individual's personal resources, which include the individual's selfesteem and self-efficacy. Competence, from a psychological perspective, also refers to the individual's capacity to interact effectively with their environment. As groups are composed of individuals, the group can also develop levels of group or community competence.

In layman's terms, when we talk about SC, we contend that we are referring to the "glue" that holds groups of individuals together in communities. The "glue" refers to the connections between individuals and groups, which are the relationships, networks and competencies, that characterize social capital. Without this "glue" we are merely a collection of individuals unconnected to one another. Therefore, from a psychological viewpoint in order to develop SC, we are trying to optimize the strength of the connections between individuals. As psychologists we know what drives and motivates individuals and we also know and understand how communities operate. Therefore, we have the capacity to combine this information in a way that facilitates not only the development but also the strength of the glue. However, as community psychologists, our conceptual understanding of how individuals interact and relate to others in communities is through the concept of sense of community.

For the purposes of this paper we have adopted the definition of SoC as defined by McMillian and Chavis (1986). According to McMillan and Chavis, SoC is comprised of four major components: namely, (1) membership, refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group. This also includes the attributes of boundaries (the difference between in-group and out-group), emotional safety (protection of group intimacy), sense of belonging and identification (feeling that one belongs in the community and is willing to make sacrifices for that community), personal investment (working for the community leads to feelings that they have earned membership which is valuable and meaningful), common symbol system (means of identifying who belongs to a community); (2)

influence, which is the two way relationship between the community and its members; (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, which refers to the positive continual reinforcement members receive from the community; and finally (4) shared emotional connections, which includes contact hypothesis and quality of interaction, (there needs to be positive interaction between members), closure to events (cohesion), shared valent event hypothesis (shared importance), investment (the more one invests), effect of honor and humiliation on members, spiritual bond (intangible connection between members).

Having a conceptual framework such as SoC with its clearly identifiable components is useful. An added advantage of this framework and concept is that there are also instruments that have been developed to measure it. The most widely used and validated measure of SoC (Chavis & Pretty, 1999) is the Sense of Community Index (SCI) developed by Perkins, Florin Rich, andWandersman (1990). The SCI consisted of 12 items with a "true" or "false" response format and a reliability coefficient (Cronbachs alpha) of .8. These 12 items are divided evenly between the four sub-scales identified above. The scale was modified to utilize a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, unsure, agree, strongly agree) with a possible score range of 12–60. The modification to the response format allows participants to note the intensity of responses (Nasar & Julian, 1995).

1.1. Context of research

In contrast there are no well defined measures of social capital. In Australia, Onyx and Bullen (2000) developed a 36-item scale to measure SC, the Social Capital Questionnaire (SCQ) to measure SC. The subscales contained in the SCQ are participation in the local community, neighborhood connections, family and friends connections, work connections, proactivity in a social context, feeling of trust and safety, tolerance of diversity, value of life. This is a relatively new instrument that has, to date, had limited application in comparison to the SCI.

1.2. Types of data

In order to understand how investigating SoC may contribute to an understanding of SC the following case studies present examples of SoC as it has been found to exist in four different contexts, the Western Australian adult community, adolescent Jewish community, primary school children and the rural and urban context.

1.3. Aim of this research

The following case studies provide the impetus for an exploration of the way in which the "glue" of SC is operating across different contexts and through this qualitative examination inferences are drawn about how SoC may inform SC.

1.4. Case study 1—understanding community in the Western Australian adult population

This study sought to clarify the adults' conceptualization of the term community in Western Australian society, in particular the Perth Metropolitan area (Green, Cohen, Pooley, & Pike, submitted for publication). This qualitative research utilized a semi-structured interview format to obtain 16 adults' understanding of the term 'community.' A content analysis resulted in the identification of seven broad themes that reflected the participants' understanding of the term community. These were as follows: (1) Geographical attachment to place which refers to the way participants felt towards their place of

Table 1

Key themes for case study 1
1. Geographical attachment to place—membership in relation to boundaries and geographical location
2. Communality reflect the notion of shared emotional connection in that the current study identified shared responsibility and shared interests–shared events valence hypothesis, shared interests–spiritual bonds, shared goals–shared investment, shared ideas–valence, shared past–shared history
3. Social interaction relates shared emotional connection (contact hypothesis)
4. Active involvement and participation relates to membership
5. Family—integration and fulfillment of needs, shared emotional connection
6. Sense of belonging—sense of belonging and identification
7. Transience—membership

residence; (2) Communality which refers to the subjective feeling that people belong together and includes attributes such as shared responsibility, shared interests, shared goals and shared ideas; (3) Social interaction which refers to the degree to which some people engage in social interaction with one another and includes such factors as social networks, availability of support and helping behavior; (4) Active involvement and participation refers to the process by which individuals take part in the decision-making processes of groups or institutions that affect them and includes the attributes of having a voice and having an influence over the community, making a contribution to the community; (5) Family refers to those people of immediate blood relation or stepfamilies that lived in the same house. Family was in all cases considered to be part of their definition of community; (6) Sense of belonging which refers to the feeling of group acceptance and devotion includes the attributes of a safe environment and familiarity with the community to which participants felt they belonged; and (7) Transience, which refers to the ever-changing nature of community, in this context, community, is seen as dynamic and constantly changing according to the needs of its members.

Although this research investigates the concept of community the findings represent direct relevance to understanding the participants sense of community (Pooley, Pike, Drew, & Breen, 2002). The resulting seven themes align with McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of sense of community (Table 1).

1.5. Case study 2—sense of community in Jewish adolescents in Western Australia

This quantitative study (Stein, Cohen, Pooley, & Pike, submitted for publication) aimed to look at sense of community of the adolescent Jewish community. Participants in this study were 167 Jewish students aged between 15 and 17 years who completed the self-report 12-item SCI. In addition, socio-demographic data were collected including information about group and youth movement affiliation and birthplace. Data were analyzed using multiple regression to determine which socio-demographic variables predicted SoC. Results indicated that there were four variables that significantly predicted the Jewish adolescents SoC. These were the (1) Grade level (Year 12 students, typically aged 17 years, had a higher SoC); (2) Gender (males higher SoC than females); (3) Level of observance (level of religiosity) with medium level (neither irreligious nor highly observant) exhibiting higher levels of SoC); (4) Length of time in Perth (students who had resided in Western Australia for a period of at least 5–7 years showed the highest level of SoC) (Table 2).

Table 2
Key themes for case study 2
1. The grade level points to a developmental explanation about the participant's connection to the Jewish community, however it is difficult to separate out the effects of time and experience with the Jewish community. Therefore, this may be confounded with accounts of a high migrant population, and similarities of the ages of the subject. However, it does fit with membership, integration and fulfilment of needs, shared emotional connection
2. Male membership is reinforced and perpetuated, common symbol system, influence, and fulfillment of needs
3. Level of observance at the medium level provides all the aspects of the SoC framework as the majority of the Jewish community function at this level
4. Length of in time in Perth does not naturally fit into the SoC framework. It may indicate something about the nature of the transience of the community

1.6. Case study 3—adult's experience of living in an urban or rural community

This study utilized qualitative and quantitative methods to look at rural and urban communities in Western Australia (O'Donnell, Pooley, Cohen, & Pike, submitted for publication). The aim of this study was to differentiate the meaning of SoC for members of rural and urban communities. As part of the study participants were asked to complete the SCI to determine their SoC to their respective communities. Participants were 47 rural and 47 urban residential members. A second qualitative component of the research consisted of a semi-structured interview exploring their experience as members of either a rural or urban community. Results indicated that (1) Membership; (2) Influence; (3) Emotional connections; and (4) Fulfillment of needs, are salient in determining an individuals SoC within both rural and urban settings (Table 3).

1.7. Case study 4—children's concepts of sense of community

This qualitative study aimed to explore the developmental aspects of children's sense of community (Pooley et al., 2002). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 46 children aged 9–12 years, who were attending a number of local primary schools. The interview questions were based on McMillian and Chavis's SCI scale, which had been adapted for children. The findings indicate that for children, understandings of community focus on the relationships shared with significant others central to their experience of childhood, namely family, friends, and neighbors. Children also described community in terms of environment, both built and natural. Further exploration of the children's understanding of community yielded insights into the role of activities, interactions, positive and negative aspects of community and problem solving in their understanding of community (Table 4).

Table 3
Key themes for case study 3
1. Membership—through belonging to and participating in local clubs and groups, knowing, recognizing, and being involved with others
2. Influence—a community that works together, attracts agencies, and works through its local government
3. Emotional connection—participants talked of positive emotional connection to people within the community. This included people being friendly to one another, people getting along well, being sociable, being involved with family and friends, and knowing people through work and having opportunities for interaction. These were highlighted as being very important for individuals in both communities in terms of their lives and feeling of community
4. Integration and fulfillment of needs—on the whole participants indicated that the community meets the needs of its members. This includes recreational activities, social activities, provides residents with opportunities to interact and relax, having time to spend with family and friends, providing employment and education, and availability of services and facilities

Key themes for case study 4
1. Membership—relationships with people (family, friends and neighbors, good and bad people, nice people, people they know and don't know). Safety (emotional and physical), physical place and proximity to facilities
2. Influence—relationship to council, self-reliance, strategies
3. Shared emotional connection—vandalism (shared valence hypothesis), school, play and sports
4. Integration and fulfillment of needs—organized activities, family activities, facilities and resources

In the following sections we will present our findings under two major headings. The first section will look at what the results of what each case study reveals about SoC in each of the contexts. The second section will discuss and provide a synthesis of these findings in terms of their relationship to SC.

2. Results

In case study 1 all the themes (geographical attachment to place, communality, social interaction, active involvement and participation, sense of belonging, family and transience) align with the SoC framework as articulated by McMillian and Chavis (1986). This would suggest that these are key factors that constitute sense of community for these Western Australian adults.

In case study 2 there were four variables (grade level, gender, and level of observance and length of time in Perth) identified as predictors of SoC. The result of higher grade level being correlated to a higher SoC could be related to the developmental level of the students. However, one needs to be aware that the population from which this sample was drawn are predominantly migrants from South Africa and therefore it is difficult to separate out the effects of time and experience with the local Perth Jewish community and their former South African Jewish community. The second predictor, gender, is not surprising as male membership is reinforced and perpetuated in the Jewish religion. Males are exposed to a greater range of traditions and ceremonies, and it is this symbolism which promotes their inclusion into the community. With regard to the third predictor, level of observance, the majority of the Jewish community in Perth, operates at a traditional, medium level of observance. There are only small numbers of the Jewish community who align with the more orthodox and reform levels of observance therefore the dominant traditional group is reinforced. Finally, the fourth predictor concerning the length of time in Perth indicates that the Jewish day school provides a vehicle for students to develop a strong SoC as the day school is a central part of the Jewish community.

Case study 3 highlights the applicability of the SoC concepts in both the urban and rural context.

The results indicated that membership, influence, emotional connections and fulfilment of needs are salient in determining an individual's SoC within both rural and urban settings.

As these concepts align directly with the SoC framework it emphasizes the transportability of the SoC model to different communities within Western Australia.

The final case study is one of the first studies researching SoC with children. This study maps the adult concepts underpinning SoC into children's language. Children's understanding of community is based on the connections shared with others during their childhood, which may include family, friends, and neighbors. Their understanding of the term community is expressed through familiar experiences and networks such as the family, the school, and organized sports. In addition children refer to their community as a place, both built and natural which provides the opportunity for them to interact with others. Thus, for children the community is both a place and process.

3. Discussion

From the community psychology perspective SoC provides a language and a framework which can be used to develop our knowledge and understandings about the way in which individuals operate in groups and communities, as is evident from the case studies above. SoC allows us to understand the individual's connection to the community, which is central to the concept of SC. Although community psychology embraces SoC the definition of SoC may inform the level of SC within a community. While SoC, like SC is also an abstract term, the key components of SoC are identifiable and assessable. This has been demonstrated from the analysis of the four case studies where, although there are differences in SoC depending on the context, the same major elements exist in all. These key elements seem to hold regardless of age, gender or location. Arguably, this makes SoC a useful construct as we can readily identify its components and SoC offers a well-developed instrument to measure the construct. As the concept of SC has emerged there is no single accepted standardized measure. This may be due to the complex nature of the concept, which may be difficult to represent. Central to the concepts of SoC and SC is the context in which individual's relate and perceive their community, in order to fully understand this relationship a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods should be utilized. The 12-item SCI offers a viable alternative to inform the level of SC. In addition qualitative information through interviews should be used to enhance the results obtained from the SCI. This contexualises SC so that it is understood as part of the individual's connections and not as an isolated construct.

Although SC has not been part of the language and terminology of community psychology (Perkins, Fisher, Butterworth, & Hughey, 2000), and SoC has not been a part of the formulation of SC there is an opportunity for bringing together these two concepts to enhance our understanding of the community. What community psychology can offer is a process focus to develop and enhance our understanding of SC in communities.

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