

# Recreation, Arts, Events and Festivals: Their Contribution to a Sense of Community in the Colac-Otway Shire of Country Victoria

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## Abstract

*So what does the concept of 'sense of community' mean to a rural society? Some would argue that sense of community is more important to rural society because it literally defines the community. This is in contrast to a larger community, where there are many sub-communities that define the make-up of the overall community and as such significantly distorts and diminishes the sense of community.*

*There are many concepts, functions, and activities that are part of defining and developing a sense of community. One group of activities that many rural societies believe contributes to a sense of community are festivals, events and recreation. The purpose of this paper is to articulate the value recreation, arts, events and festivals have on a rural shire's sense of community, including evidence of membership opportunities in the community, the ability for individuals to influence the direction of the community, the presence of a network to allow for integration and fulfilment of needs, and the potential for various levels of shared emotional connectedness. The research conducted for this paper was completed in conjunction with the Colac-Otway Shire in country Victoria.*

## Introduction

A sense of community is an experientially based concept that focuses on the interrelationship and interdependence of individuals in a specific setting. The most common type of 'community' is based on geographic location, but may also include membership in a group, or individuals who share similar beliefs, behaviours, characteristics and/or values. Sense of community is difficult to pinpoint as it is an intangible concept, but it can often be interpreted in terms of other measurable terms.

The purpose of this article is to determine what breadth of recreation, arts, events, and cultural programming is desirable to develop an optimal sense of community in a rural setting. The research conducted to answer this question focused on determining whether sense of community is unique to each individual community within a rural society, or representative of the offerings of the central administrative structure of the region. For this article, a *community* is defined as a group of individuals living in the same area, such as within the confines of a rural society. A *rural society* is defined as social life taking place outside of a major metropolitan area/urban centre where the major population and economic activities are widespread over a significant distance, but the major population size ranges from 5,000-25,000 residents. These population figures were derived from two sources – (1) levels 4 and 5 of the Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Classifications (RRMA) (Australian Government, 2007; Victoria Metropolitan Alliance, 2007); and (2) the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) (2007) population estimates for Statistical Local Areas (SLA's).

## **Community Studies: A Review of the Literature**

There is a long history of community studies rooted in the extensive history of traditional sociology and the social sciences. One of the earliest recognised and most influential studies was the Chicago School. Emerging from the University of Chicago, the body of work was two-fold. In the initial study during the 1920s and 1930s, researchers investigated urban sociology in terms of the urban environment by combining traditional sociological theory with ethnographic fieldwork. The second study, which took place after World War II, focused on utilising field research combined with symbolic interactionism. The researchers' overall goal was gauge social relations in the city of Chicago by using the city as a social laboratory (Pfohl, Van Wagenen, Arend, Brooks & Leckenby, 2006).

Another significant investigation was the Middletown Studies of the 1920s through to the Great Depression. This was an in-depth series of three field studies that focused on the city of Middletown, Indiana as representative of a typical, small, urban centre. The goal of the studies was to discover the most significant cultural norms, and hence better understand social change. The studies focused on the major aspects of social life including work, home and family, leisure time, government and community, and religion (Hoover, 1989; Lynd & Lynd, 1937; Lynd & Lynd, 1956).

While the two previous studies formed the historical framework for community studies, there have been many other studies and theories developed over the years that have focused on various aspects of community life. One of the more significant areas is the concept of 'sense of community'. Many of the early studies into the concept of sense of community were focused on Sarason's definition of psychological sense of community – 'the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure' (1974, p. 157). Shortly thereafter, Gusfield (1975) emerged with the two dimensions of community: territorial and relational. Territorial focused on the physical location of the community whereas relational focused on the nature and quality of relationships. This was later described by Riger and Lavrakas (1981) as 'physical rootedness' and 'social bonding'.

Notwithstanding these previous studies, the most widely accepted theory of sense of community is that of McMillan and Chavis (1986). They propose that sense of community is composed of four elements. The first is membership in the specific community, which includes such concepts as boundaries (language, dress, ritual, etc.); emotional safety and security; a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment in the community; and a common symbol system (name, title, logo, landmark, etc.). Second is influence – where individuals believe they have influence in the direction of the community, and the cohesiveness of the community is a factor of having influence over the individual members. Third is integration and fulfilment of needs, where members of community are rewarded for their participation in relation to their needs, their desires, and what is valued by both the individual member and the community.

The fourth element is a shared emotional connection. McMillan and Chavis (1986) believe there are seven features of emotional connection that create a sense of community: contact hypothesis, quality of interaction, closure to events, shared value event hypothesis, investment in the community, effect of honour and humiliation on community members, and spiritual bond. *Contact hypothesis* is the theory that the level of closeness between people is directly proportional to the level of personal interaction of members within the community. *Quality of interaction* is the direct effect members of a community have on each other. *Closure to events* seeks to reduce vague and unclear interactions and ensure that tasks are completed. Problems in these areas will hamper group cohesiveness. *Shared value event hypothesis* focuses on creating group bonds as a function of a common event. These events are not always positive in nature, for example - a crisis of some nature. *Investment in the community* considers the level of involvement and the relationship to perceived importance of the community of individuals. The *effect of honour and humiliation on community members* focuses on the public appearance of individuals to other community members. If they have been honoured, they will feel more drawn to the community. If they have been humiliated, they feel less appeal to belonging to that community.

The final and most difficult element to measure is *spiritual bond*, as it is beyond a physical or emotional connection to a community. It can best be described as the transcendental belief of the community above all others. An example might be someone who grew up in a rural town in country Victoria but now lives in a larger city such as Melbourne. Although they are physically in the community of Melbourne, the individual always refers to being from that rural town, and always has a transcendental belief that they will always be a part of that rural community.

It is apparent that sense of community is a very strong concept in the value and beliefs systems of societal members. However, there needs to be some influence that builds this sense of community. One such influence is social capital - a social science concept that traces its origins back to sociology and economics, focuses on the concept that membership of a social group grants requirements, responsibilities, and benefits on individuals (Hawe & Shiell, 2000; Portes, 1998; Wall, Ferrazzi, & Schryer, 1998). One of the major areas of study where social capital has been researched is through health promotion. In their article on social capital and health promotion, Hawe and Shiell (2000) surmised that the concepts of power within social environments, building relational ties between members of communities, creating opportunities for empowerment and capacity building by individuals within communities, and working together to create 'healthy' public places and communities, for all are the results of effective management of social capital.

It can be argued that recreation, arts, events, and festivals are extensions of health promotion activities, as they create connections between individuals and the networks, norms, and trust that arise from those connections (Griswold & Nichols, 2006; Putnam, 2000). As such, social capital as related to recreation, arts, events, and festivals must build on three main areas: civic engagement, informal social engagement, and tolerance combined with trust (Griswold & Nichols, 2006).

Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of communities by developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make a difference. In addition, it means promoting the quality of life in

a community, through both political and non-political processes. Individuals who are morally and civically responsible are recognized as being a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considered social problems to be at least partly their own. Members of communities who are civically engaged are willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate (Ehrlich, 2000).

Informal social engagement is defined as continuous interactions that occur between individuals and groups as a result of a common association. The associations could be as a result of social networks, common interests, attendance at similar activities, or almost any situation that brings people together. Tolerance combined with trust is simply the concept of being able to accept the individual differences of people, communities and activities, while believing in the quality of the relationships created through social capital.

The ultimate goal of social capital is to enhance the quality of life as a result of positive outcomes through interactions with others. This is articulated in social capital theory, where it is hypothesised that individuals gain access to social capital through membership in networks and social institutions to maintain or improve their position within a specific community. Social capital theory provides an important conceptual framework between the attributes of individuals and their immediate social situation, and provides a link between social influences and developmental outcomes (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; King & Furrow, 2004).

Social capital serves a role in the formation of regional identity. Regional identity is a phenomenon that forms throughout historical and territorial socialisation (Raagmaa, 2002). Regional identity then provides a context for the development of social networks. According to Cattell (2001), social networks provide social support, self-esteem, identity, and perceptions of control (Cattell, 2001; Cohen & Syme, 1985). However, it is very difficult to generalise what level or type of social networks is most beneficial to building a sense of community. It is postulated that due to the differences between individuals and communities, the social networks utilised to create a sense of community will vary and be specific.

Cattell (2001) also stated that social networks are integral to the level of participation in social activities by individuals within the community setting. For recreation and arts programs, and community festivals and events to take place, there must be participation by members of the community. In order to build a sense of community as related to these activities, social capital needs to provide the glue that binds the community together in collective action, and the gears to direct community members towards participation (Krishna, 2002).

In addition, social capital and the resulting social networks have a direct influence in participation by individuals from outside the community via tourism. *Tourism* implies travel away from home and has tangible and intangible components that meet the wants and needs of an individual. This definition is substantiated by research conducted by (Butler, Hall and Jenkins (1998), where they explained that while the terms leisure, recreation, and tourism are closely interrelated and often used interchangeably, and the specific activities engaged in during them are very similar,

the key difference with tourism involves the location of the activities, the duration of time involved, and the attitudes, motivations, and perceptions of the participants

According to Picard and Robinson (2006), the observance of, and participation in, festivals and 'celebratory events' (which would include recreation, arts, and other significant events) are an increasingly significant aspect of the contemporary tourist experience as they provide points of meaningful connectivity and spectacle for visitors. In addition, there has been a long tradition of communities using and devising activities as opportunities for social and commercial exchange (Picard & Robinson, 2006). This is further articulated by Beeton (2006) in that tourism in communities is not simply a case of whether to encourage tourism visitors or not, but also what type of visitors and what type of tourism it decides it wants or needs. This directly correlates to the belief that tourism helps build a sense of community, as tourism is an integral part of the interrelationship and interdependence of individuals in a specific setting, and is a significant influence on social capital.

As a result, there are two key supplemental factors that need to support social capital, and hence enhance the sense of community – mass media and managerial performance. With regard to mass media, there are a number of issues that must be realised by communities when getting the message out about activities. First is the fact that there is currently a shift towards increased use of new media. Effective use of new media including multimedia, computer technology, and digital media is crucial to attracting the younger generation, but it is still important to continue utilising the traditional media outlet including print media (newspapers) and broadcast media (radio and television). This is defended by research that shows that older people are more reliant on the media medium they developed a connection with during their youth (Jung, Qui, & Kim, 2001; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Therefore older adults (55+) tend to be more reliant on print media, young and middle adult aged (25-55) adults gravitate towards broadcast media, and youth (under age 25) tends to get their information from the Internet and other new media sources (Jung, Qui, & Kim, 2001). The failure to consider how people use media will likely lead to a lack of communication with community members, decrease participation in recreation and arts programs, negatively affect the success of events and festivals, and decrease the level of sense of community.

This has a direct correlation to the need for optimal managerial performance from those who are in leadership positions within the recreation and arts programs, the various events and festivals, and the administration of the community. In a study conducted by Moran (2005), the impact of social capital on managerial performance on two areas was examined. First was structural embeddedness, which focuses on a manager's network of work relations. Second was relational embeddedness, or the quality of those relations. The study concluded that both elements of social capital influence managerial performance. Structural embeddedness centres on routine, execution-oriented tasks, while relational embeddedness plays a significant role in new, innovative tasks (Moran, 2005). Conclusions could then be drawn that individuals in leadership positions, regardless of whether with recreation and arts programs, events and festivals, or the administration of the community need to have a clear understanding of not only how to run these activities, but how to sell, market, and communicate with the community. This in turn would serve to build a sense of community and hence a following. This can be further elaborated into the desire to

attract those from outside the community to visit for specific activities, hence increasing awareness and enhancing the sense of community.

Upright (2004) wrote that social participation in such activities as recreation and arts programs, events, and festivals is profoundly social as a result of being a product of both a person's experiences and attributes, and of their ongoing social relationships. Upright (2004) further stated that participation in these activities is a function of social capital – mainly due to the attributes of one's close associates, but also because of the status cultures into which they have been socialised early in life. By understanding what breadth of recreation, arts, events, and cultural programming is desirable to develop an optimal sense of community in a rural setting, we should learn more about the effective and efficient use of social capital. In turn, this should aid in identifying strengths, areas that are lacking or need improvement, and goals for future development of social capital necessary to reach an optimal sense of community.

### **Researching a Sample Community**

#### **Getting to Know the Colac-Otway Shire of Country Victoria**

The Colac-Otway Shire is located in the south west of Victoria, about 160 kilometres from the Melbourne GPO. The Colac-Otway Shire is a rural, residential and resort area encompassing a total land area of 3,250 square kilometres and includes two main townships with many small villages and localities. The largest town is Colac, which serves as an administrative, retail and commercial centre for the Shire and surrounding region with a population of 12,000. The other major township is Apollo Bay, which serves as the major tourism centre, with a permanent population of 1,000 that grows to over 15,000 during the summer season.

In November 2005, discussions were held between the Colac-Otway Shire and the University of Ballarat about the creation and validation of the Colac-Otway recreation plan. Following this meeting a two part research project was developed - first a survey followed by a series of four community forums. These forums took place in Apollo Bay, Birregurra, Colac, and Gellibrand.

In April 2006, after the final community forum was held, further discussions ensued regarding the creation and validation of both the Colac-Otway events plan, and the arts and culture plan. A similar research methodology was utilised – a survey followed by a series of two community forums; one in Colac and the other in Apollo Bay.

The research was conducted by Performance Marketing, a sport and event consultancy group sponsored by the School of Human Movement and Sport Sciences at The University of Ballarat. This group, managed by students within the program, seeks to provide a learning environment designed to simulate a professional workplace similar to that which the students confront upon graduating. The information compiled was then analysed, interpreted, and disseminated by the authors.

#### **Collecting and Analysing Information from Stakeholders of the Shire**

For the initial part of the study about the recreation plan, a survey was sent to approximately 110 sport and recreation stakeholders in the Colac-Otway Shire. Questions covered a wide range of issues including fees, user/member numbers, nature and condition of the facilities, volunteers, communication of information, and future challenges and solutions. The data for the closed ended questions were analysed using the SPSS statistical software package. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data, with graphs, tables and textual explanations. The results were then utilised to develop the open-ended questions for the community forums to determine the role recreation contributes to a sense of community in the Colac-Otway Shire. The responses were analysed qualitatively as recommended by Boyce (2002) to identify and define problem relevant to the topics area, some of which may have existed in the communities of interest but was unbeknownst to the management of the Colac-Otway Shire. The data collection tools for the community forums were focus groups, with questions being asked in an informal and flexible manner. Content analyses were carried out on the data using triangulations and theme searches (Boyce, 2002), which identified key words and phrases used by group members. These words and phrases helped to identify the history of recreation and events initiatives, and the levels of community support that they enjoyed.

A similar methodology was utilised for the events plan and the arts and culture plan. The survey was sent to approximately 400 arts and culture, festivals and events stakeholders in the Colac-Otway Shire. It covered the following issues: demographics, active/passive artistic involvement, knowledge of events, celebrations and festivals in the Shire, condition of the facilities, perceptions and opinions of Shire arts and culture, festivals and events activity, the role of the Shire in supporting or improving arts and culture, festivals and event, and future challenges and solutions. Again the results from the survey were used as a framework for the questions to be asked during the community forums. Focus group members were encouraged to raise issues that they thought were important. The responses were analysed qualitatively using triangulation and theme searches. Responses allowed for the classification of events and arts/culture initiatives.

### **Significance and Need for the Colac-Otway Study**

This study postulates that sense of community is most significantly developed from a whole series of smaller events, arts and cultural productions, specialised festivals, and recreational offerings. As a result, the major research question to be answered was ‘what breadth of recreation, arts, events, and cultural programming is desirable to develop an optimal sense of community in a rural setting?’ Based on the results, a secondary set of questions to be asked included ‘should the Shire be involved with all of these?’, and ‘where does the involvement stop?’ The goal of this study was to validate the claim that recreation, arts and culture, and events are important to rural communities, and determine the range of activities that are needed to have the desired impact. It is assumed that this research will not only produce significant information about rural sense of community, but will serve to raise further questions for study in the future to increase the body of knowledge in this significant aspect of rural society.

### **Results from this Community Study**

#### **Recreation**

Prior to entering the community forums to determine the role of recreation in building a sense of community, a survey was implemented to collect background information on the perceptions of recreation stakeholders. The results showed that they believe the main roles of the Shire include (a) being a key supporter and promoter of clubs and recreational activities in the Shire; (b) providing appropriate funding to the clubs and organisations; (c) providing the knowledge required for club administrators to access grants and benefits from government organisations; and (d) contributing to the development and maintenance of recreational facilities.

This information was then used as a starting point for the community forums in four locations: Apollo Bay, Birregurra, Colac, and Gellibrand. The results from all four forums were similar in nature, and four main concerns became evident. First, there was a widely held concern about the quality, maintenance and development of facilities. There was an evenly divided concern about new facilities, with group participants wondering about their and the Shire's role, and the participants indicated that there was a lot of dissatisfaction with old facilities.

Funding was the second most dominant concern. There was a lack of knowledge about how to apply for funding, with participants having no idea if there was funding available, or how to apply for it. Participants were also wary of the red tape involved in submitting applications for funding.

In three of the forums, there was a concern regarding a lack of volunteers. It seemed that in most clubs there are volunteers who carry out a number of roles, and these people are the backbone of sport and recreation in their communities. There was also concern that these volunteers were overworked and under-trained. The solution, agreed on where the topic was raised, was for a Shire appointed sports administration expert who would be available to help all sport and recreation organisations in each community.

Finally, there was widespread agreement that a sports administration expert was needed in all communities in the Shire. This person would have expertise in the legal, commercial, financial, and governance issues of club administration.

### **Arts and Culture, and Events**

As with the recreation research, a survey was administered to collect background information to determine the role of arts and culture, and events as related to building a sense of community. The findings identified the involvement of individuals within the community in these types of activities. Most significant was that approximately half (53%) of the surveyed population attends Arts and Culture, Festivals and Events outside the Shire every year; three quarters (75%) of the surveyed population attends Arts and Culture, Festivals and Events inside the Shire every year; and nearly 58% of the surveyed population encourages visitors from outside the Shire to attend Arts and Culture, Festivals and Events inside the Shire every year. Most interesting to these responses is that the research showed less than half of the surveyed population (44%) believed that Arts and Culture, Festivals and Events get adequate support from the Shire; and approximately one third of the surveyed population believed that Arts and Culture, Festivals and Events gets sufficient community support. As a result, nearly



58% of the surveyed population believed that Arts and Culture, Festivals and Events in the Shire require significant development, and 70% believe that Arts and Culture, Festivals and Events should be maintained and funded by the Shire.

This information was then utilised to develop a focus for community forums in the largest communities within the Colac-Otway Shire: Colac and Apollo Bay. The results from each differed because of the range of activities offered, and the focus of the community. Colac is an administrative, retail and commercial centre with a significant number of permanent residents, while Apollo Bay is the major tourism centre of the Shire with a large percentage of the population being seasonal.

### *Colac*

In Colac, there are numerous events run during the year including the Kana Festival (a community festival), the Birregurra Festival (festival to celebrate country life), Metamorphosis (women's music theatre project), and Incfest (festival to celebrate International Day of People With A Disability). Although the research showed that the response to the community events was generally positive, there were a number of areas of concerns to stakeholders: financial issues related to event management, poor communication management, and inadequate facility management.

With regard to the financial issues, the research showed that there is a belief that new life needs to be brought into the events without significantly increasing their costs. Some respondents feared that community support for some of the events was decreasing and that this was probably because the events need something new. Most of the events in the Shire were seen as the same old thing, in the same small area. The desirability of new attractions seemed to be widely supported, but the cost of bringing them to these events was said to be prohibitive.

As related to communication management, stakeholders were concerned that a plan to maintain and increase community interest for events is either not in place or not communicated to the community in a timely manner. Many of the arts and cultural activities in this Shire have a low level of structure and good community support. There is a belief that these activities would benefit greatly if the Shire offered more promotional and organisational support. There seems to be more support in Colac itself, but a strong need to support the smaller communities of the Shire.

Communication concerning arts, culture and events, which most agreed was a significant responsibility of the Shire, was described as lacking. It was felt that the Shire's website was not user friendly, deterring organisations from using it as a means of promoting events. Additionally, for many people, the only source of information about events, arts and culture is the local paper, which regularly fails to publish time, date and place of events. In sum, there was a widely held concern about the timeliness and the circulation of information from the Shire. Some people are not hearing about events or programs, and some are not hearing in time.

The expressed view of the respondents was that the current methods of using website bulletin board, as well as advertising in *The Echo* (newspaper), are not adequate. It is recommended that information needs to be placed in various news sheets that are printed in towns around the Shire (*Apollo Bay News Sheet*, *Otway Light*, and both the

*Surf Coast Edition* and *Bellarine Edition* of the *Geelong Echo*). Finally, there is perceived to be a community wide problem with people booking events with conflicting dates due to a lack of communication from events organisers.

From a facility management standpoint, there were concerns raised about the Colac-Otway Performing Arts and Cultural Centre (COPACC) regarding the lack of accessibility due to the inflexible leasing agreement, the concern that it is an insecure venue for visual arts and touring exhibits, and the expense to hire the facility. Despite these concerns, the respondents generally agreed that this is a wonderful venue, however in terms of its utility by the Colac arts fraternity, it is not very accessible due to the inflexibility of the cinema leasing agreement. This leasing agreement was seen as contentious by some forum participants, and their negative perceptions were voiced on several occasions.

### *Apollo Bay*

In Apollo Bay, the concerns of the stakeholders centred on three major issues: communication, facilities, and the need to have a festival that allows for participation of all members of the community. The majority of comments focused on the need for better communication, and almost all of the comments were a direct reflection of information previously collected in Colac. This verified that there is an obvious lack of communication across the entire Shire with regard to events, arts and culture. It was agreed that the community needs three to four weeks notice of upcoming events. The general perception was that currently they are not being notified early enough.

With regard to facilities, it seems that while in Colac the problem is the lack of access and availability, the problem in Apollo Bay is the quality of facilities. Three major facilities in Apollo Bay are the Mechanics Institute, the Senior Citizens Centre, and the Youth Club. The Mechanics Institute needs a new roof due to leaks, the Senior Citizens Centre needs new chairs and moveable track lighting for art shows, and the Youth Club requires renovation, although mostly aesthetic as the building is structurally sound. There was clearly some tension in the town over which facilities should be prioritised, in terms of management and renovation resources.

Finally, a well planned submission was recently made for a Marine Life Festival in which all levels of the Apollo Bay community could participate. This would be an event that takes the location of the town and the culture of the community in combination in an offering that is uniquely Apollo Bay. This is important to a rural community to help further differentiate their place within the rural society of Colac-Otway.

## **Conclusions**

The original research question asked ‘what breadth of recreation, arts, events, and cultural programming is desirable to develop an optimal sense of community in a rural setting? The survey research and the subsequent community forums have shown that there is no single answer to this question... it is unique to each community within a rural society. Each town, while a part of the larger Colac-Otway Shire, still seeks to maintain its uniqueness through recreation, events, arts and cultural programming. In turn, the Shire should support that uniqueness within their community mission and

vision. This means that the Shire needs to have a more significant role in supporting the individual town offerings, specifically in the following areas: communication to and from the community; facility, event and program maintenance and development; support for volunteers; and administrative expertise.

Of these four areas, the biggest concern is communication. Regardless of the type of organisation or location, a lack of communication can only lead to problems. It seems that the Colac-Otway Shire needs to incorporate an integrated communications system to rectify this situation. In reviewing literature and other research conducted by the University of Ballarat, it seems the issue of communication resonates across rural communities. The results show that there is a desire to communicate better, but there is either a lack of knowledge on what is involved with an integrated communication system, or a worry that the cost of such a program would far outweigh the benefits.

There are many resources available to help rural communities put together such a plan, including universities (via student projects and community service), and other communities that have gone through similar processes in the past. Should either of these resources not be readily available, here are some recommendations about how to get started by:

- setting up an integrated communications plan starts with all parties involved having a full understanding of their roles within the community. Openness breeds understanding, and understanding leads to discussions on how to work together towards common goals. These common goals need to be addressed in terms of 'value' for the individual town, the overall Shire, and the members of the rural community. It is important to align these goals with the philosophy (values and beliefs), mission (current aims and plans), and vision (future direction) of the rural society. In addition, the goals must be articulated in measurable terms through a list of objectives. These objectives are the individual benchmarks that need to be accomplished to reach the goal;
- next to be addressed would be an understanding of who the key target audiences are. This includes contacting all members of the rural society, pertinent media outlets (print, radio, television and internet), and internal promotional opportunities (websites, bulletin boards, community newsletters, and town notice boards). This increased communication should not only increase awareness, but also increase the number of attendees and volunteers for those activities.
- Finally, it is time to create the messages to be communicated. These messages will take many forms including broadcast, written and word-of-mouth. This is a four-step, circular process:
  - The process starts with the development of the messages. The messages have to be clear, concise, and attract the attention of the listener.
  - After the messages are created, the implementation stage begins, which involves making sure that all stakeholders understand what is to be accomplished with the messages. By having everyone on the same page, communication will be smoother.
  - The third stage is the management stage, where a determination of the best method for getting each individual communication out to the public is made.
  - Once the message is out, we enter the fourth step of the circular process, where there must be constant evaluation of the communications to determine whether the information is being received. This can be accomplished by

tracking numbers of responses to the messages. If the message seems to be getting out – great. If not, then the entire process needs to be reviewed and other plans implemented.

While the creation of an integrated communication plan seems like a complex and time consuming process, the benefits far outweigh the pitfalls. An efficient and solid integrated communications plan will allow managers to spend less time trying to rectify problems, provide stakeholders with a greater awareness of events, and to more effectively build brand equity for each event.

The Colac-Otway Shire has used recreation, arts, events, and festivals to build a sense of community amongst their population. In reviewing the McMillan and Chavis (1986) theory of sense of community in terms of the research, there is evidence of membership opportunities in the community, the ability for individuals to influence the direction of the community, the presence of a network to allow for integration and fulfilment of needs, and the potential for various levels of shared emotional connectedness in the Colac-Otway Shire. However, the research does not show the level to which each element must reach in order for there to be an optimal sense of community. This question presents opportunities for future research into how each element determines overall sense of community.

### **The Future**

There are two main issues rural societies will face in the future. First and foremost is their growth in population in permanent residents moving from urban areas, tourists, and holiday-makers. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) (ABS), more than 62% of the Australian population currently resides in one of 15 communities with more than 100,000 people. More and more people are looking to escape from the ‘hustle and bustle’ and come out to the country. This migration will have a direct effect on rural communities and the programs and activities that they offer, both at the private and governmental levels. To solve some of the resource issues, assistance may be needed from Federal and State Governments. This trend may not be met with open arms by members of rural societies who pride themselves on their uniqueness and individuality. However, as more funding is needed to maintain recreation, cultural and leisure facilities, increase the number and varieties of activities, and deal with the issue of lack of volunteers, rural communities may have no choice than to go to the government, or create their own opportunities through sponsorships.

The second issue is selling the value of each activity on its merits. Festivals, events and recreation are often viewed as being a symbol for community identity and pride. They are also viewed as an opportunity to escape from everyday life by increasing the physical and mental health of participants and the community at large. With funding being limited, many activities within rural communities will be fighting it out to get their ‘piece of the pie’.

### **Recommendations for Continued Research**

The research into the Colac-Otway Shire seems to show that festivals, events and recreation do contribute to a community. However, it also highlights an ongoing

issue - it is extremely difficult to pinpoint the true definition of 'sense of community' in terms of any society, let alone a rural society. Many would argue that it should be easier to discern in a community that is rural because of its limited size and population. However, the research clearly shows that 'sense of community' differs from shire to shire, town to town, and community to community. Sense of community is reflected in the actions of the members of the community, which in turn is directed by the individual philosophies, missions and visions of each.

As noted in the review of literature, participant observation has been a common form of sociological research for almost 100 years. In the studies and theories reviewed, a common and recurring theme emerged. To truly understand whether an activity contributes to a sense of community, you would have to either be a part of that community, or be engaged with that community. This has been most often achieved as a result of field studies. While field studies seem to be most effective, they are often costly and time ineffective because: (1) the amount of time needed to engage with a specific community is high; (2) the number of locations that could be researched domestically, internationally, and globally is endless; and (3) the number of researchers needed to accomplish the necessary research can be boundless.

This is great news for researchers since there seems to be a limitless opportunity to conduct research - as long as they have the resources available. Each additional study connecting the relationship between social capital and the concept of 'sense of community' further advances this unrepresented area of sociological research.

However, it would be a significant advance in sociological research if generic models were created for use in identifying those qualities and quantities that enhance 'sense of community' in various societies. The zones utilised as a part of Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Classifications (RRMA) could serve as a framework for the model, and would allow for differentiation and comparison between various regional compositions. This framework could also be expanded from population models into other areas of research interest including but not limited to socioeconomics, cultural diversity, accessibility issues, infrastructure availability, and tourism impact. However, this would require a significant overhaul of the RRMA classifications as it has not been updated since 1991, and there have been significant changes in population distribution since the creation of the classification system.

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