

THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY, A CONTEMPORARY THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This paper aims to review the theoretical framework of the concept of sense of community using an analytical approach. It discusses the appropriateness of the classical models to contemporary social changes. This review indicates that a sense of community contributes to improving mental health and enhancing social cohesion. Nonetheless, there are still research gaps related to the comparison between traditional and digital communities, as well as the relationship between the sense of community and social and legal policies. The paper concludes that enhancing the sense of community requires comprehensive strategies to build fair and stable societies.*

Key words: *sense of community, social cohesion, digital communities, cultural diversity, migration*

1. Introduction

Different societies are constantly undergoing change and development, particularly those that are open to welcoming foreign immigrants and refugees, and which are often a destination for migration or asylum under difficult political, economic, or humanitarian circumstances. As both the indigenous populations of these societies and the foreign immigrants begin to attempt to coexist, they face numerous demands related to adaptation, coexistence, integration, etc. At the core of this, the concept of a sense of community emerges as one of the most important social concepts associated with community development and achieving stability and safe, effective coexistence within them.

The concept of Sense of Community is an essential concept in social psychology and related fields, as it reflects the extent to which individuals feel they are an integral part of the community to which they belong. Sarason first introduced it in 1974, emphasizing the importance of emotional bonds, belonging, and mutual support in enhancing individual well-being and strengthening social cohesion. Over recent decades, this concept has become significant in guiding social policies, community development, and establishing legal frameworks related to civic participation and social integration.

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The theoretical foundations of sense of community emphasize that a strong sense of belonging enhances individuals' motivation to contribute to collective goals, increases mutual trust, and strengthens social networks. McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed this concept through a four-dimensional model that includes membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. These dimensions provide a systematic framework for analyzing community dynamics in diverse contexts, from local neighborhoods to virtual communities.

Contemporary social changes, such as globalization, migration, and digital connectivity, have transformed traditional concepts of community, presenting both challenges and opportunities for maintaining a sense of community. Migrants and minority groups often face difficulties in establishing meaningful social connections within host societies, which can impact their psychological adjustment, social engagement, and sense of belonging. Similarly, digital platforms have redefined social interaction, enabling the formation of virtual communities that contribute to the experience of social connectedness, but can sometimes complicate it in real-life contexts.

Considering these evolving contexts, it is essential to reexamine and critically analyze the sense of community from a theoretical perspective. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive review of the theoretical foundations of the sense of community, examine its applications in contemporary social contexts, and highlight existing research gaps. This will provide insights that will contribute to future studies and help translate these insights into practical applications in social policies, community development plans, and legal frameworks that support social cohesion and integration.

2. Methodology

This paper focuses on analyzing the concept of sense of community in various contexts, highlighting societies characterized by their openness to accepting immigrants and foreigners. The study adopts a theoretical analytical approach that examines models and concepts related to sense of community, as well as the dynamics of diverse communities, from local communities to digital communities. It also identifies research gaps and understands how to foster a sense of community in contexts of migration, multiculturalism, and interaction via digital platforms.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive methodological framework that allows for assessing communities' ability to achieve social adaptation, cohesion, and effective belonging for their members, with a focus on identifying research gaps to provide future recommendations applicable to social policies and community development plans.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Origin of the concept and the most important preliminary studies

In psychological and social interpretation, the sense of community is almost synonymous with the concept of "village," which denotes close family, friends, safety,

predictability, shared activities, and security. This concept reflects the kinship relationships, obligations, values, and responsibilities that village living meant in the past (Fisher, Son, 2002). The linguistic definition of the concept confirms this meaning. Cambridge business English Dictionary defines it as "a genuine sense of community," which refers to a sense of care and friendship within a neighborhood (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

The concept of sense of community was first introduced by Sarason (1974), who defined it as individuals' sense of belonging and connection to a particular community, with a perception of mutual support and emotional bonds between them and others. Sarason explained that this sense of belonging forms the basis of individuals' psychological and social well-being, thereby improving their capacity for positive interaction with their environment. On the other hand, he pointed out that the absence of this feeling may lead to social isolation and psychological weakness, emphasizing the importance of studying this concept in various social contexts.

Sarason added that this concept also includes interdependence among individuals, with the desire to maintain this dependence by working for the benefit of the group, resulting in a larger, more stable, and dependable structure (Sarason, 1974).

In this sense, the concept of a sense of community combines psychological, social, and linguistic dimensions to reflect how belonging, mutual support, and relationships based on trust and commitment contribute to enhancing the well-being of individuals and the sustainability of societies over time.

3.2. McMillan and Chavis's model (1986)

McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theory of sense of community (SC) is considered the most important, forming the basis for much of the current research on sense of community in the social psychology literature. They defined the sense of community as "A sensation of belongingness, a perception that members are significant to one another and to the collective, and a mutual belief that members' requirements will be fulfilled through their dedication to coexistence" (McMillan, Chavis, 1986, p. 11).

McMillan and Chavis developed a comprehensive model of sense of community, framing it in four main dimensions:

Membership: Membership includes a sense of inclusion, a shared sense of personal connection to the group, and the belief that one has contributed something to becoming a member and therefore deserves to be part of the group (Lardier, Opara, Cantu, Garcia-Reid, & Reid, 2022).

Membership includes an individual's sense of belonging to the community, recognition of the boundaries between community members and others, and a sense of security within the group. All these emotions can be articulated through reciprocal statements such as "It's my group" and "I am part of the group" (Humaidah et al., 2018).

Influence: This term operates in two directions. On the one hand, influence refers to the fact that for a member to be attracted to the group, they must have some degree of control or influence over the group's actions, and thus the member makes a difference

within the group. On the other hand, the group itself also makes a difference to its members, and group cohesion depends on its ability to influence its members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs: This refers to the extent to which a society understands and meets the needs of its members, whether social, emotional, or practical, thereby strengthening the bonds among members of that society (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Shared Emotional Connection: This refers to the dedication and conviction that individuals have in their shared experiences and futures, their history, their locations, and the time they spend together (Lardier et al., 2022). This dimension represents the emotional bonds and shared experiences that bring members of a society together, such as celebrations, traditions, or shared crises (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Studies indicate that the McMillan and Chavis model remains the primary framework for understanding sense of community, providing clear dimensions that can be measured and analyzed.

Based on the above, strong communities are characterized by their ability to provide their members with constructive means of social interaction and their ability to create important occasions for community participation. They are also characterized by their ability to provide and adopt effective methods for resolving conflicts within them, provide opportunities for community members to be recognized and valued, open the door to the potential of individuals to contribute to community growth, and provide opportunities to enhance a sense of spiritual connection among their members.

This model is considered as a crucial reference used to analyze both traditional and modern societies, and it also serves as an effective tool for understanding the impact of society on mental health and social integration.

4. Sense of Community in Contemporary Contexts

With the development of social studies, the concept of a sense of community has expanded, with new developments and models emerging, including:

Digital communities: Through this contemporary type of community, individuals can form strong virtual bonds that contribute to their sense of belonging. With the advancement of technology, digital communities have emerged as an alternative or complement to traditional communities. Individuals can interact and communicate online, forming social networks and, consequently, virtual communities.

Research indicates that belonging to these communities can have both positive and negative effects on individuals. On the one hand, these communities provide opportunities for connection and social support, especially for people suffering from social isolation. On the other hand, some digital communities can promote negative behaviors such as bullying or internet addiction (Oksanen, 2024).

It can be argued that digital communities have created new environments for social belonging, but at the same time, they may reduce direct interaction with the local community, calling for a re-evaluation of the concept of belonging in the digital age.

Multicultural Contexts and Immigration: Immigration is one of the most significant factors influencing a sense of community, as immigrants face significant challenges in building new social ties and maintaining their cultural identity. This sense of community becomes linked to the cultural and social integration process of immigrants and refugees. Studies show that immigrants who feel a sense of belonging to their new communities enjoy better mental health and a greater capacity for social integration (Djogbenou et al., 2025).

For example, Salami et al. (2019) found in a study conducted in Canada that immigrants who face social and cultural barriers feel less of a sense of belonging, which negatively impacts their experience of settlement and social integration.

Community Cohesion: Recent research has focused on factors that influence a sense of community, such as individuals' participation in social activities, communication with others, and appreciation of cultural diversity. This opens the door to a deeper understanding of how community policies can support the creation of more cohesive and engaged communities (Norris, 2008). Social cohesion is considered a fundamental element in building sustainable societies, as it refers to the ability of individuals and groups to live together peacefully and cooperatively, despite their differences.

From a legal perspective, social cohesion is enhanced by policies that encourage equality, justice, and civic engagement. Studies indicate that communities with strong social cohesion are better able to address social and economic challenges and have lower rates of crime and violence (Lalot, Abrams, & Travaglino, 2021).

These theoretical and applied developments reflect how the concept of sense of community has expanded to include new dimensions beyond the traditional framework. Thus, the study of sense of community is no longer confined to local contexts or traditional societies but has become essential for understanding the dynamics of belonging in a changing world shaped by technology, cultural diversity, and social policies alike.

5. Discussion

5.1. Evaluating theoretical models

Although the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model remains a fundamental reference in the study of the sense of community, due to its clarity in defining the essential dimensions of this concept, relying exclusively on it may seem inadequate when attempting to explain contemporary social phenomena. Today's societies are no longer confined to direct relationships and conventional interactions. Rather, globalization and digital technology have produced new forms of connections and affiliations, making it necessary to reconsider the validity of this model in its original form.

Hence, it can be argued that there is an urgent need to develop more flexible and comprehensive approaches that accommodate current social and cultural transformations and explain the overlap between real and virtual belonging, as well as between local and the global.

5.2. Adapting the concept to contemporary changes

The reality of migration and multiculturalism demonstrates that the concept of a sense of community is no longer static but is being reshaped according to new contexts. Immigrants, for example, may find it difficult to build strong emotional ties with the host society, weakening their sense of belonging and complicating the integration process. This challenge is not limited to the social aspect; it also affects mental health and quality of life.

Conversely, digital societies have imposed a different pattern of belonging, whereby individuals can find a virtual support network that temporarily relieves them of the local support networks required in traditional societies.

However, this network may, in turn, weaken direct interaction with their immediate surroundings. This duality between real and virtual belonging reveals an urgent need to reconsider the classic concept of a sense of community, so that it accommodates the transformations of the digital age without losing its roots in direct human relationships.

5.3. Research gaps

Despite the growing interest in sense of community, there remain areas that are not fully explored, and thus researchers face several gaps that merit future research. Comparisons between forms of sense of community in traditional versus digital environments remain limited, obstructing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, the link between the sense of community and legal and social policies related to immigration and multiculturalism is not sufficiently addressed. Also, there is a clear lack of research examining the relationship between the sense of community and mental health, especially in rapidly developing nations. Bridging these gaps through future research would open the way for developing models that are more capable of explaining the complexity of today's individual and group experiences.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that the sense of community is a cornerstone for understanding social cohesion and individual integration within societies, whether traditional or digital, local or multicultural. The theoretical review demonstrated that the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model provides a robust methodological framework for analyzing dimensions of the sense of community, including membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

The paper also demonstrated that contemporary social changes, such as migration, globalization, and digital technology, have reshaped the nature of community ties, calling for a development of our understanding of the sense of community appropriate to these contexts. It was demonstrated that migration and multiculturalism may affect

individuals' sense of belonging and, consequently, their psychological and social well-being, while digital communities provide new opportunities for connection and social support, but can sometimes weaken local community bonds.

From a legal and social perspective, social cohesion is a vital component for promoting civic engagement, implementing justice and equality, and supporting social inclusion policies. Enhancing a sense of community requires an integration of legal frameworks and social initiatives to ensure effective integration of individuals into society and build a mutual support network.

These findings highlight the need for future research to deepen our understanding of community and develop practical applications in social inclusion policies, community development, and promoting social cohesion, contributing to building more just, cohesive, and stable societies.

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