Sense of Community

David W. McMillan
Nashville, Tennessee

This article revisits the theory of sense of community originally developed in 1976 and subsequently presented by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, and Wandersman (1986) demonstrated its empirical strength as a theory and developed the Sense of Community Questionnaire. This was essential work in getting the theory used. As reflected in the contents of this special issue, the theory has since stimulated considerable empirical research.

As I enter midlife, I review the issue in terms of the perspective and experiences of that period of my life. Thus, this paper examines the question: Do the past 20 years add any new thoughts to the theory? I believe the answer is "yes." This article extends the principles offered by McMillan and Chavis (1986). The same four elements remain but are rearranged and renamed as follows: Spirit, Trust, Trade, and Art. Presently, I view Sense of Community as a spirit of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be trusted, an awareness that trade, and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as art.

Spirit

Spirit is the first element of this version of sense of community. Originally, the boundary aspect of the first principle of sense of community was labeled "membership"—membership emphasized boundaries that delimit "us" from "them" and that create the form of emotional safety that encourages self-disclosure and intimacy. Membership referred to one's sense of belonging and to a sense of confidence that one has as a member as well as the aspect of acceptance from the group that facilitates belonging.

Membership also alluded to the cognitive dissonance associated with a member's responsibility to sacrifice for the community. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986) cognitive dissonance facilitates sense of community in these ways. First, it enhances a member's confidence. Second, it creates in the member a sense of entitlement. Finally, it serves to build loyalty to the group.

In the current version of the Sense of Community theory, spirit replaces membership as the defining aspect of this principle. Boundaries continue to distinguish members from nonmembers and provide emotional safety. Greater emphasis, however, is now placed on the spark of friendship that becomes the Spirit of Sense of Community. Each of us needs connections to others so that we have a setting and an audience to express unique aspects of our personality. We need a setting where we can be ourselves and see ourselves mirrored in

I wrote the 1986 McMillan and Chavis piece and left academia in the same year, abandoning the theory to fate. David Chavis established this theory by giving it an empirical base and by taking my sense of Community Questionnaire all the way to validity and reliability. Bob Newbrough championed the theory and embodied its principles. Without them, the theory would not have appeared in texts or become the subject of research. I am especially grateful to Bob Newbrough, my mentor and spiritual inspiration.

Requests for reprints should be addressed to David W. McMillan, Ph.D., 115 28th Avenue North, Nashville, TN 37203.

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the eyes and responses of others. In the view of some poets, human nature is naturally driven
to express itself:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells:
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

To be nobody but yourself
In a world that is trying it damnedest
to make you like everybody Else
That’s that hardest Thing

e.e. cummings

Emotional Safety

Truth is the primary unit of analysis for the Spirit of Sense of Community. This raises two
issues. First, membership opens doors. The status of member brings with it the right to be in the
group. Second, can the community provide the acceptance, empathy, and support for members to
speak their truth and be themselves? “The Truth” in sense of community is analogous to materials
in the construction of a building or to an electric spark in the flow of electricity. Without Truth
there can be no sense of community. What we mean by “The Truth” is a person’s statement about
his or her own internal experience. No one knows better than the speaker how the speaker feels.
He or she is the final authority about his or her emotions. If community members are willing to
look inside themselves and honestly represent their feelings to others, then they are speaking
“The Truth” as they know it. If they say, “this is my opinion,” or “I feel sad,” or “my left ankle
hurts,”—who can argue with them? That must be “The Truth.”

The first task of a community is to make it safe to tell “The Truth.” That requires
community empathy, understanding, and caring. There are three steps to creating such a
sense of intimacy. The first step require the member’s courage to tell his or her intensely
personal truth. The second and third steps involve the community. Can the community accept
this truth safely? Can members of the community respond with courage equal to the self
disclosing member’s courage and develop a circle of truth tellers and empathy givers?

Intimacy occurs along a range. At one end, is the most personal, which is telling a
person or a group how one feels at the time about that person or group. This takes personal
emotional courage and also incurs psychological risk. At the other end of the continuum,
intimacy entails speaking about what one thinks about people, events, or things from another
place and time.

McMillan And Chavis (1986) cited several studies to demonstrate that members are
attracted to a community in direct relation to their emotional sense of it. Recent studies continue
to confirm this point. Generally, these studies asked participants, “Do you disclose more when
you feel safe?” The answer has overwhelmingly been “yes” (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Brandt,
Boundaries

My concept of boundaries remains relatively the same as before (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As noted originally, boundaries make emotional safety possible. Evidence which supported the idea of community boundaries has focused predominantly on the social scientist’s sympathy for the deviant. Recent work continues to voice that concern by explaining the phenomenon of scapegoating as a way of defining group boundaries (Forsyth, 1988; Alexander, 1986; Stein, 1989; Ng & Wilson, 1989). Kalma and Ellinger (1985), for example, found that groups created firmer boundaries defining the “us” vs. “them” in circumstances of scarcity and lack of resources. Vemberg (1990) noted “us” vs “them” boundaries in his study of newcomers to the seventh and eighth grades. These newcomers had difficulty penetrating the boundaries of established peer groups. Recent work has added to the concern for the deviant the recognition of the benefits which boundaries provide to the members of a community. Reported studies demonstrate that boundaries allay fears by identifying who can be trusted as “one of us.” (Keller, 1986; Kaplan, 1988; Weinig, Schmidt, & Midden, 1990; Weiss, 1987; Simon & Pettigrew, 1990; Karasawa, 1988).

To the above purposes, I would add that boundaries define the logistical time/place settings for a group to be a group. Boundaries also relate to the content of communication. Do members disclose their feelings about the person or persons that are the object of these feelings or do members discuss subjects outside the community that are not shared and not intimate? Boundaries can distinguish the appropriate subject matter for group discourse.

Sense of Belonging

Similar to the concept of boundaries, sense of belonging basically remains intact with minor changes in language and emphasis. Originally, McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified one element of sense of belonging as “expectation of belonging.” At this time, that concept seems best described as the “faith that I will belong.” Acceptance remains unchanged. These two elements emphasize the two points of reference that are constant in sense of community theory—the member and the community.

Faith That I Will Belong

Faith comes from within the member. Acting on such faith represents a risk and requires courage since humiliation can result if the faith is not validated. In essence, people bond with those whom they believe want and welcome them. In addition to the evidence cited in McMillan and Chavis (1986) supporting the importance of faith, Rugel (1987) provides confirmation in the findings of a sociometric study of psychotherapy groups. In effect, when we believe that we will be welcome, that we fit or belong in a community, we have a stronger attraction to that community.

Acceptance

This element reflects the community’s response to the aforementioned faith. Just as a member has the responsibility of believing in his or her membership or right to belong, the community’s responsibility is to accept the member as a member. In their study of school football teams, Westre and Weiss (1991) demonstrated that acceptance from the team creates a sense of attachment in individual team members. Unchanged, therefore, is our earlier assertion that when one is accepted by the community one is more strongly attracted to that community.
Paying Dues or Cognitive Dissonance

Truth telling, emotional safety, crossing the boundaries from "them" to "us," and a sense of belonging are not achieved without sacrifice and challenge. Communities need to test new members to determine if they can and will be loyal to the community. Communities must know if a member will make available the time, energy, and financial commitment necessary to be a supportive, effective member. In McMillan and Chavis (1986), I defined this concept in terms of cognitive dissonance. This term, however, is too esoteric to convey the simple notion that to be part of a community involves "paying dues."

Paying dues promotes sense of community by first opening a door for a member in the group. It also gives the members a sense of entitlement. In Walt Disney's movie "Pocahantas," Kohohe was promised the chief's daughter for his brave sacrifice in battle. The war veteran's respect and reward is just one obvious example of a community's way to express its appreciation for a member's sacrifices. However, just as paying dues "entitles" a member, a community also has the right to expect that dues will be paid. Children are often told that with rights and privileges comes responsibility. The rights of community membership come with the expectation that the community can call on its members to make sacrifices. The military draft and taxes exemplify this principle.

Beyond taxes and the findings originally cited by McMillan and Chavis (1986), recent empirical evidence extends the basis for associating paying dues with sense of community. Ingram (1986), for example, studied church congregations. He defined "paying dues" in terms of sharing one's personal testimony or witness in front of the church. He found that meeting this challenge increases a person's status in the church. Rugel's (1987) study of psychotherapy groups demonstrates that the more one invests in a group the more one is accepted by the group. Findings from other recent studies suggest an important qualification to this principle. If the required sacrifice is too great, it can weather the member's attachment to the community. Swan (1992) and Seta, Seta, and Erber (1993) argue that there is a limit to the amount of sacrifice that creates closeness. This position is consistent with the experience of psychotherapists who treat patients with phobias. When the therapist asks patients to create a desensitization ladder, it is essential that each rung be separated by reasonable increments. If the steps are too far apart, the patient will fail and treatment will increase rather than decrease fear. This caveat about paying dues is consistent with McMillan and Chavis' (1986) prior discussion of the effect of humiliation on community membership. If members are asked to do more than they can do, then their inadequacy is exposed. The consequent shame may produce a need to distance oneself from the community.

Trust

The Spirit of sense of community can begin as a spark. With truth telling, emotional safety, sense of belonging, and dues paying, this spark can become a flame. But it will never become a fire unless there exists in the community an authority structure that can sustain the fire.

In McMillan and Chavis (1986), this second principle was called Influence. A community must be able to influence its members and members must be able to influence the community. To be effective, a community must have these influences flowing concurrently to create a sphere of influence. The salient element of influence is the development of trust. Trust develops through a community's use of its power. Who has it? When do they have it? If not present in some members, when don't they have it? For the spirit of community to survive beyond its first initial spark, the community must solve the problems arising from the allocation of power.
The first requirement for such resolution is that people must know what they can expect from each other in the community. In effect, some sort of order must be established. This would include the development of community norms, rules, or laws. When a sense of order is present, one can predict, plan, and commit. Knowing a community’s norms or laws allows one to develop a sense of personal mastery. Consider what has been achieved by mankind’s knowing the rules of mathematics, engineering, chemistry, and physics. In a sport such as golf, order is found in knowing and executing the mechanics of a good golf swing. In baseball, knowing how to hold the ball in relation to the seams allows one to throw a curve ball. The relationship between knowledge and behavior extends to almost every human endeavor including dancing, drawing, music, etc.

Learning the laws of how things work gives one mastery and creates the potential for attaining one’s desired level of performance. In a community, this knowledge translates into social, emotional, and political potential. Without social norms, however, there is only social chaos. The results of studies of group cohesion, (Battenhausen & Muringham, 1991; Dobbins & Zaccaro, 1986; Fuhrer & Keys, 1988; Keller, 1986; Zahrly & Tosi, 1989) for example, suggest that people become more cohesive when they know what to expect from one another.

Once order exists, the next element for developing trust in a community relates to authority. It is assumed that an individual or individuals has to be in charge. A community must have a way to process information and make decisions. Without this capacity, the community will eventually perish. The decision maker or makers must have authority over the members for the sense of order to be maintained in the community.

In primitive times, the strongest man ruled. When he became weak or died, the community order was threatened or lost and the community’s survival was at risk. Eventually, primogeniture evolved to put an end to the power struggles related to the succession of leaders. This solution, however, left authority or law dependent on the leader’s will or whim. If the leader vacillated, order disintegrated. Leaders could be, and often were, self-serving and capricious and could not always be trusted to serve in other than their self-interest. For this reason in 1212, English noblemen forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. This mandated that the King would rule by establishing law and abide by legal principles instead of his personal will. It introduced into communities the concept that authority can serve many rather than self. Western civilization advanced with the American and French Revolutions to a governance concept of democracy. If leaders did not answer to the people they led, the possibility of rebellion was always present.

Social scientists have demonstrated that communities and groups are more cohesive when leaders influence members and when members influence leaders concurrently (Grossack, 1954; Thrasher, 1954; Taguriri & Kogan, 1960; Carson, Wirdemeyer, & Brawley, 1988; Newmann, Rutter, & Smith, 1989; Miller, 1990; Steel, Shane, & Kennedy, 1990). Grossack’s (1954) experimental paradigm clarifies this point. One set of participants are instructed to work cooperatively. A second group of participants are instructed to compete against one another. Grossack assumed that these instructions would create respective high cohesive and low cohesive groups. In fact, Grossack found that, in the “cooperative” group, members made more attempts to influence their fellows and accepted more pressure to conform than did those in the competing groups. A review of the social science literature confirms this point—the forces of love, intimacy, and cohesiveness operate from individual participant to the group, and from the group to the individual. This process occurs all at the same time because order, authority, and justice create the atmosphere for the exchange of power. (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Lawler (1992) found that the more unequally the power is distributed within a group the
meanner and more ruthless are all members of that group. Fung (1991) found that people exerted greater personal force when they were in a relatively strong position compared with others in the group. People exerted less personal force when they were in a weaker position. Lawler also found that people used greater personal force when they believed they were right. When people believe they are following a transcendent principle, they may be inspired to passion. Thus, the belief in “principle above person” can be as effective as authority. Seta et al. (1993) found that when groups expected more than was considered fair, those groups lost the allegiance of their members. The principle of justice as a cohesive force was also observed by Chin (1990) in a study of Hong Kong Chinese college students.

Cotterell, Eisenberger, & Speicher (1992) studied wary and suspicious college students. When these students interacted with peers, their distrust was contagious. It is likely that the opposite is also true and that trust can be contagious. Roark and Sharah (1989) compared factors of empathy, self-disclosure, acceptance, and trust to see which of these were more effective in producing intimacy. They found trust to be the most important of these factors.

When a community has: 1) order, 2) decision making capacity (i.e., authority), 3) authority based on principle rather than person, and 4) group norms that allow members and authority to influence each other reciprocally, then that community has trust that evolves into justice.

**Trade**

A community with a live spirit and an authority structure that can be trusted, begins to develop an economy, i.e., members discover ways that they can benefit one another and the community. In their excellent review of the group cohesiveness literature, Lott and Lott (1965) stated: “It is taken for granted that individuals are attracted to groups as a direct function of the satisfaction they are able to derive within them” (p. 285). Since this premise is widely accepted, there is little empirical evidence to clarify exactly what is reinforcing in a relationship or group membership. Rather, most theory and research in this area only underscore the contention that if people associate together, then it must be reinforcing to do so. Since individuals and the groups that they compose are so varied, it would be impossible to define precisely what reinforcements bind people together into a cohesive group. It seems that a community is as strong as the bargains its members make with one another. In addition to a community meeting the needs of its members, sense of community will be stronger if the community can find ways to juxtapose and integrate the members’ needs and resources into a continuous bargaining process.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) made the point that communities must somehow reward their members. At that time, however, I highlighted the economic quality of community reinforcement. McMillan and Chavis (1986) labeled this principle, “Reinforcement: Integration of Needs.” This principle included the reward factor and the concept that it was the community’s function to integrate members’ needs and resources. Originally, I discussed various types (e.g., status, competence, success, and a member’s honor) of empirically supported rewards that a community might give its members. I now believe that there are innumerable types of such rewards; protection from shame to be chief among these.

When I first developed my theory of sense of community, I insisted that theory had to support the creation of a diverse community. Because of that, I incorrectly rejected similarity as being an important bonding force. In my ideal community, the democrats loved and supported the republicans and “the lion lay down with the lamb.” I now appreciate that the search for similarities can be an essential dynamic of community development. People seek a social setting where they can be themselves and be safe from shame. As communities begin
to form, potential members search for those with whom they share traits. Bonding begins with the discovery of similarities. If one can find people with similar ways of looking, feeling, thinking, and being, then it is assumed that one has found a place where one can safely be oneself.

This is the driving force behind the tendency for people in groups to think alike. In social psychology, this process is called “consensual validation;” in business, it is called “group think.” Basically, the concept implies that individuals are willing to trade independence for safety from shame. For that reason, they tend to conform in groups. Since McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) original examination of the consensual validation literature, findings from additional studies have supported the point. In his study of cohesion and productivity in work groups, for example, Greene (1989) found that group consensus is associated with group productivity and cohesion. In a study of therapist-patient relationships, Klein and Friedlander (1987) found that when patients perceive themselves to be similar to the therapist, they are more attracted to the therapist. In a study of the effect of perceived homogeneity on interpersonal communication in groups, Storey (1991) found that perceived homogeneity facilitates group interaction. Bernard, Baird, Greenwalt, & Karl (1992) found that group consensus increased group cohesion and created room for dissent and disagreement in groups without reducing group cohesion.

Much of the “group think” literature seems, in my view, to complain about how group collaboration stifles creativity. I believe that it is important that community psychologists recognize how shame drives people to search for similarities (McCauley, 1989; Posner-Weber, 1987; Turner, Pratkinis, Probascio, & Leve, 1992; Turner, 1992). As noted, this search occurs at a relatively early phase of community development. As the group develops, the focus shifts from what members have in common to how they are different. This is strategically important because there can be no real trading unless members have different needs and resources. Simply stated, if members have the same things they would have no need to trade with one another. Differences in possessions create the possibility that one member has something another needs. Once differences are discovered and needs and resources inventoried, then bargains can be negotiated. The only bargain one can have in the discovery of similarities is protection from shame.

The search for and appreciation of differences represents a beginning step toward the development of a community economy. McMillan and Chavis (1986) referred to this process as involving “complimentarity of needs.” At that time, I cited several studies that made the point that a community builds cohesiveness if it can successfully integrate members’ needs and resources. This is an economic function. A recent study of musicians in rock bands confirmed the point (Dyce & O’Connor, 1992). This study found that if the bands were successful at integrating different personality styles, they were more stable and cohesive as a group.

A community economy based on shared intimacy, which is implied by the term “sense of community,” represents a social economy. The medium of exchange in a community social economy is self-disclosure. The value of a trade depends on the personal risk involved in self-disclosure. In a social economy, the most risky and valuable self-disclosures involve the sharing of feelings. A community’s members begins by sharing feelings that are similar, i.e., that they have in common. They move on to share positive feelings about one another. Once a base of understanding and support is established, the members can begin to share criticisms, suggestions, and differences of opinion. At this point, the basis of trading becomes part of the social economy. Members have established their safety from shame and believe they can work, learn, and grow safely in their social exchanges.
Tantum (1990) studied shame in groups. He contended that shame is a primitive response to the breakdown of one's social presentation. When such a breakdown in pride, self-esteem, and dignity occurs one is likely to become self-destructive, to appear "shame-faced," to become resentful and brazen and/or to compulsively self-disclose. Effective communities protect their members from shame in their social exchanges.

When a community begins to develop an economy, it is important from the outset that the trades be fair, that exchanges are approximately of equal value. Once fair trading becomes an established practice in its history, the community will evolve to a stage in which its economy has little to do with keeping score and balancing value. Members in such a community give for the joy and privilege of giving, not for the getting. The case of parents caring for children is an example of this. In the middle of the night, a parent does not get up with a crying infant and change the baby's diapers or feed it because the parent gets something in return. This is an example of giving for the sake of giving, not for what will be gotten back in trade. Polzer (1993) found that intimacy makes people generous to their intimates.

A community cannot survive unless members make fair trades with one another. But a community is not strong if it must always keep score. When communities transcend score keeping and members enjoy giving for its own sake, communities can be thought of as being in a state of Grace. This is the unexpected and unpredictable culmination of telling the truth together, trusting one another, and making mutually rewarding bargains. As a community develops a trading history, the trust it took to begin trade at the barter level evolves into faith. With a confident faith, the barter economy becomes a market economy and the entire community becomes a potential trading partner.

Art

The final principle in this theory is "Art." McMillan and Chavis (1986) labeled this aspect of sense of community "Shared Emotional Connection in Time and Space." As explained, Spirit with respected authority becomes Trust. In turn, Trust is the basis of creating an economy of social Trade. Together these elements create a shared history that becomes the community's story symbolized in ART. A picture is truly "worth a thousand words" and stories represent a people's tradition. Song and dance show a community's heart and passion. Art represents the transcendent values of the community. But the basic foundation of art is experience. To have experience, the community's members must have contact with one another. Contact is essential for sense of community to develop.

The primary points made by McMillan and Chavis (1986) are repeated here. Contact is essential for community building, but the quality of that contact matters. Influences on the quality of community contact are: closure to events, shared outcome from the event, risk and sacrifice, and honor vs. humiliation. McMillan and Chavis (1986) referenced more than 40 empirical studies to support the principle called "shared valent event." Originally, I offered two formulae to describe how this principle works:

1. Shared emotional connection equals contact plus high quality interaction.
2. High Quality Intervention equals events (with successful closure minus ambiguity) times event valence times sharedness of the event plus amount of honor the event gives to a member minus the amount of humiliation the event gives to a member.

At this point I will leave out the formulae. I would replace the term "shared valent event" with "shared dramatic moment." The primary question at this point is: What collective experiences become art? I would suggest that a community chooses the events that become a
part of its collective heritage. These events honor the community’s transcendent values. They challenge the community to meet its highest ideals. These events become represented in the community’s symbols.

In their classic study of Jonesville, a midwestern community, Werner and associates (1949) recognized the strong integrative function of collective myths, symbols, rituals, rites, ceremonies, and holidays. In order to obtain smooth functioning and integration in the social life of a modern community, a community must provide a common symbol system. Groups use these social conventions to create boundaries. Berneard (1973) observed that Black leaders used symbols to unify the Black community and defy White authority (e.g., Black Power and the clenched fist). Nisbet and Perrin (1977) observed that intimate bonds are symbolic. “The symbol,” they said, “is to the social world what the cell is to the biotic world or the atom to the physical world... The symbol is the beginning of the social world as we know it.” (p. 47).

Writing about sense of community among college students, Schlorshere (1989) suggested that symbolic rituals create a sense of belonging and of being a part of something important. Gregory (1986) studied a group of Air Force personnel who developed and used their own language. This code signified membership and sense of belonging.

What collective experiences become art? They are stories of community contact. But contact is not enough. The contact must have a certain quality for it to become a collected memory that is art; the community must share in the fate of their common experience in the same way. In effect, it conveys the sense of “all for one and one for all.” If it was a success for one, it was, in some way, a success for all members. In addition to being shared, an event must have a dramatic impact. What makes a moment dramatic is that something is at risk for the community or its representative. Dramatic moments may create a collective memory but this does not make that memory worthy of becoming art that will be passed from one generation to the next. Unresolved ambiguity or cruelty can destroy sense of community. Events that represent these experiences rarely become art. Dramatic moments of tragedy redeemed by courage are events worthy of becoming community stories. These stories represent the community’s values and traditions.

Symbols, stories, music, and other symbolic expressions represent the part of a community that is transcendent and eternal. They represent values like courage, wisdom, compassion, and integrity, values that outlive community members and remain a part of the spirit of the community. Art supports the Spirit that is in the first element of sense of community and thus, the four elements of community are linked in a self-reinforcing circle.

References


