

# Sense of Community

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

November 19, 2022

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2022). *Sense of Community*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=39427>

Sense of community (or psychological sense of community) is a concept in community psychology and social psychology, as well as in several other research disciplines, such as urban sociology, which focuses on the experience of community rather than its structure, formation, setting, or other features. Sociologists, social psychologists, anthropologists, and others have theorized about and carried out empirical research on community, but the psychological approach asks questions about the individual's perception, understanding, attitudes, feelings, etc. about community and his or her relationship to it and to others' participation--indeed to the complete, multifaceted community experience.

In his seminal 1974 book, psychologist Seymour B. Sarason proposed that psychological sense of community become the conceptual center for the psychology of community, asserting that it "is one of the major bases for self-definition." By 1986 it was regarded as a central overarching concept for community psychology (Sarason, 1986; Chavis & Pretty, 1999).

Among theories of sense of community proposed by psychologists, McMillan & Chavis's (1986) is by far the most influential, and is the starting point for most of the recent research in the field. It is discussed in detail below.

## **Definitions**

For Sarason, psychological sense of community is "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).

McMillan & Chavis (1986) define sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together."

Gusfield (1975) identified two dimensions of community: territorial and relational. The relational dimension of community has to do with the nature and quality of relationships in that community, and some communities may even have no discernible territorial demarcation, as in the case of a community of scholars working in a particular specialty, who have some kind of contact and quality of relationship, but may live and work in disparate locations, perhaps even throughout the world. Other communities may seem to be defined primarily according to territory, as in the case of neighborhoods, but even in such cases, proximity or shared territory cannot by itself constitute a community; the relational dimension is also essential.

Factor analysis of their urban neighborhoods questionnaire yielded two distinct factors which Riger and Lavrakas (1981) characterized as "social bonding" and "physical rootedness", very similar to the two dimensions proposed by Gusfield.

## **Beneficial antecedents found in early work**

Early work on psychological sense of community was based on neighborhoods as the referent, and found a relationship between psychological sense of community and greater participation (Hunter, 1975; Wandersman & Giamartino, 1980), perceived safety (Doolittle & McDonald, 1978), ability to function competently in the community (Glynn, 1981), social bonding (Riger & Lavrakas, 1981), social fabric (strengths of interpersonal relationship) (Ahlbrandt & Cunningham, 1979), greater sense of purpose and perceived control (Bachrach & Zautra, 1985), and greater civic contributions (charitable contributions and civic involvement) (Davidson & Cotter, 1986). These initial studies lacked a clearly articulated conceptual framework, however, and none of the measures developed were based on a theoretical definition of psychological sense of community.

## **Primary theoretical foundation: McMillan and Chavis**

McMillan & Chavis's (1986) theory (and instrument) are the most broadly validated and widely utilized in this area in the psychological literature. They prefer the abbreviated label "sense of community", and propose that sense of community is composed of four elements.

Four elements of sense of community

There are four elements of "sense of community" according to the McMillan & Chavis theory:

### **Membership**

Membership includes five attributes:

boundaries  
emotional safety  
a sense of belonging and identification  
personal investment  
a common symbol system

### **Influence**

Influence works both ways: members need to feel that they have some influence in the group, and some influence by the group on its members is needed for group cohesion.

### **Integration and fulfillment of needs**

Members feel rewarded in some way for their participation in the community.

### **Shared emotional connection**

The "definitive element for true community" (1986, p. 14), it includes shared history and shared

participation (or at least identification with the history).

### **Dynamics within and between the elements**

McMillan & Chavis (1986) give the following example to illustrate the dynamics within and between these four elements (p. 16):

Someone puts an announcement on the dormitory bulletin board about the formation of an intramural dormitory basketball team. People attend the organizational meeting as strangers out of their individual needs (integration and fulfillment of needs). The team is bound by place of residence (membership boundaries are set) and spends time together in practice (the contact hypothesis). They play a game and win (successful shared valent event). While playing, members exert energy on behalf of the team (personal investment in the group). As the team continues to win, team members become recognized and congratulated (gaining honor and status for being members). Someone suggests that they all buy matching shirts and shoes (common symbols) and they do so (influence).

### **Empirical assessment**

Chavis et al.'s Sense of Community Index (SCI) (see Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Long & Perkins, 2003), originally designed primarily in reference to neighborhoods, can be adapted to study other communities as well, including the workplace, schools, religious communities, communities of interest, etc.