

Psychological Sense of Community in Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Sense of community has traditionally been associated with groupings of people from geographical locations (e.g., villages, suburbs, towns, and cities). Community psychologists have reported a growing disillusionment amongst people in their search for a sense of community and community values in these place-based communities (Dunham, 1977, 1986; Glynn, 1986; Sarason, 1974). Sarason (1974) stated his belief that “the dilution or absence of the psychological sense of community is the most destructive dynamic in the lives of people in our society” (p. viii).

The concept of sense of community has been expanded from place-based (“locational”) communities to include communities of interest (“relational” communities) (Bess, Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002). A recent reconceptualisation of the sense of community concept proposes that each individual may experience varying degrees of sense of community in a range of locational and relational communities, rather than within a single community (Brodsky, Loomis, & Marx, 2002). The potential for relational communities has greatly increased with the widespread adoption of the Internet, enabling the grouping of individuals with common interests that is not dependent upon the geographical location of participants.

A range of virtual environments have been referred to as virtual communities. These include newsgroups, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs) (Baym, 1995; Clodius, 1997; Hampton, 1996; Patterson, 1996; Phillips, 1996; Reid, 1991, 1995). Each of these environments meets the four minimal conditions for virtual communities outlined by Jones (1997): interactive communication, a minimum of three communicators, a common public space for interaction, and ongoing members. These virtual communities, based on shared interests rather than shared locations, are accessed by com-

puter-mediated communication (Little, 1993; Wellman & Gulia, 1999) and are evidenced by shared norms, values and practices (Tepper, 1996; Watson, 1997).

Over the last decade, research into virtual communities has suggested that at least some individuals are experiencing a sense of community within the virtual environments of their choice. Sense of community has been reported in IRC (Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 1997; Surratt, 1996), MUDs (Clodius, 1997; Hampton, 1996; Roberts, Smith, & Pollock 2002), e-mail discussion groups (Kot, 1999), bulletin boards (Dunham, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusella, Ellsworth, & Dodd, 1998), computer-supported distance learning programs (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, & Robins, 2000), online support groups (Glasser Das, 1999) and newsgroups (Baym, 1995; Blanchard & Markus, 2002; Phillips, 1996; Watson, 1997).

Recent results from population surveys suggest that participating in virtual communities is a common experience. Horrigan and Rainie (2001) reported that 84% of Internet users have at some time contacted an online group, and of these almost four-fifths are in regular contact with at least one group. More than a quarter of Internet users report being a member of a virtual community (Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001). Sense of community may not be specific to a virtual community but to online community in general. The GVI 8th WWW User Survey (1997) found almost half of respondents reported feeling more connected to people since coming online, with the feeling of connection increasing with Internet experience.

The research summarised above has established that at least some individuals experience a sense of community in at least some virtual environments. In order to further explore what this sense of community entails we will examine three studies (Blanchard & Marcus, 2002; Roberts et al., 1997, 2002) that judged sense of community in virtual environments against an established framework of psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY

McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined 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” (p. 9). Four elements underlie their definition: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection (Table 1). The definition and elements are widely used in community psychology research (Bess, Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002).

Roberts (2001; Roberts et al., 1997) examined sense of community within IRC based on interviews with previous and current users. IRC consists of a network of computer servers and client programs that provide a text-based virtual environment, supporting synchronous (“real time”) typed communication between users in public channels or through private messages.

The IRC users interviewed ranged in the sense of community experienced on IRC from none to a very strong sense of community. For a small group of research participants no sense of community was experienced. Another small group of research participants reported their home channel had some sense of community, but felt their channels resembled families or social groups rather than communities. However, the majority (75%) of IRC users interviewed reported experiencing a sense of community within their “home” channel. The experience of sense of community developed over time as the individual formed relationships with other channel members. Research participants who experienced a sense of community in their

home channels varied in their views of sense of community in other channels. Most acknowledged that other channels may have a sense of community, but that the degree of sense of community may vary between channels, with some channels having no sense of community.

Sense of community can be experienced at the individual channel or network level. One research participant felt that the IRC network itself had a sense of community. However, for the majority of users interviewed, the IRC network was seen as too large to have a sense of community. Communities were seen to exist at the channel level within the larger society of the IRC network. Sense of community was usually experienced at the level of the channel, rather than the IRC network as a whole and was strongest for the home channel.

Research participants who indicated that they experienced a sense of community in their home channel where asked what gave their channel a sense of community. The major theme emerging from respondents’ answers related to the caring and sharing and respect between members of a channel. Caring activities included praying, listening, advising and supporting others. Events in channel members’ lives were noted and celebrated within the channel. Shared interests were also seen as important. This provided strong evidence of shared emotional connection and the integration and fulfilment of needs.

Communicating with the same people in the same place on an ongoing basis provided IRC users with a sense of belonging. Structural and organisational features of an IRC channel also aided the establishment of boundaries. Channel operators were seen as important in regulating the behaviour of other users. Combined, these factors suggest the element of membership was also met.

Table 1. Elements of sense of community proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986)

Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Feelings of belonging to the community * Personal relatedness within the community * Boundaries provide an environment of emotional safety for members to share and grow closer to one another * Scapegoating reinforces established boundaries * Aided by use of a common symbol system
Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Bidirectional influence between community and members * Consensual validation construct (community members need to know their way of viewing the community is shared) * Collective action increases the sense of ownership of a community * Communities that accept diversity can provide freedom from conformity for members
Integration and fulfilment of needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Reliant on individual members having their needs met by the community and in turn meeting the needs of other community members * Effective reinforcers include the status of membership, community success, and the competence of community members * Shared values perform an integrative function
Shared emotional connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Shared history and common experiences * Contact hypothesis (the more people interact, the closer they become to each other) * Personal and emotional investments

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