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In Search of Community In Western Australia: A Qualitative Study of Adults Conceptualisations of Their Communities

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Communities are dynamic, historically determined, and complex, and the topic itself has concerned social scientists for some time (Durkheim, 1964, Weisenfeld, 1996). However, there has been an intrinsic problem in previous research arising from the ambiguity of the concept of 'community', specifically, the contradictions concerning its essential meaning. The aim of this study was to determine whether there are other ways of thinking about community without taking on any unwanted connotations of previous conceptualisations from past research. The research was based on the social constructivist paradigm and qualitative methodology was employed. Conceptualisations of the term community were surveyed among 16 participants using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Results were analysed using analytic induction methodology. Participants identified seven interrelated concepts: geographic attachment to place, communality, social interaction, active involvement and participation, family, sense of belonging, and transience. From this research, understanding of the term 'community' has been shown to have far reaching implications, which involve influencing the assumptions underlying community development initiatives and programs promoting social change. Furthermore, a socio-psychological understanding of community can help to facilitate the intentional creation of community when and where it is needed.

While the idea of community has been studied at length in the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Puddifoot, 1996), community studies in Australia are relatively recent in comparison (Bishop, Sonn, Drew & Contos, 2000). There are major differences between the Australian context and that of the United States of America and the United Kingdom. For example, Australia has a different socio-political history to both these countries (Archer, 1997; Rapaport, 1977). Furthermore, geographic size, population demographics, urbanisation, and distances between major towns and cities are also major differences between all three countries (Jupp, 1997). One of the implications of these differences is their unique influence on how Australians, particularly people living in the Perth metropolitan area, view and understand the notion of community.

There is a need to seek another way of thinking about community without incorporating any unwanted connotations of previous conceptualisations, since previous research within the area has tended to obscure rather than clarify this concept of 'community' (Puddifoot, 1995). Previous research has indicated that there is an intrinsic problem concerning the difficulty of the concept of 'community'. That is, there are contradictions concerning its essential meaning (Puddifoot). Many definitions of the term 'community' have been offered during the past 100 years. Over 40 years ago, Hillery (1955) noted 94 different definitions of community that had been cited within the research literature. However, as Puddifoot noted, the 'catch-all' nature of these definitions inevitably lead to a dilution of the essential nature of the phenomenon.

Theories and Definitions

Although there have been many attempts to define the term community no definitive definition has been proposed. From the literature reviewed, four broad perspectives on community have emerged. First, community as a geography or territory, which has a finite and bounded physical location. Second, community as a local social system, with interrelated social institutions
and relationships. Third, community as a particular kind of human association or relationship irrespective of location, for example, relationships of tradition or religion. Fourth, community as ideology, which is an expression of what it should be rather than what it is – ‘the good life’ (Hillery, 1955; Heller, 1989; Wiesenfeld, 1996).

Garcia, Giuliani and Wiesenfeld’s (1999) definition of community as “a dynamic whole with the structural and functional aspects permanently articulated with each other” (p. 730) is the most comprehensive and workable to date (Chavis & Pretty, 1999). However, the term community remains an abstract concept containing several dimensions (Bulmer, 1985; Day & Murdoch, 1993). The need to study, explore and understand these dimensions have led to the development of models and measures of how people feel about living within a community.

Dimensions of Community

The identification and examination of the processes and dimensions that are specific to community, and are not found in other social structures, provide much of the rationale for regarding ‘community’ as a distinct area of investigation. Two concepts closely related to community are sense of community (SOC) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and community identity (Puddifoot, 1994, 1995, 1996). The components of these concepts and their relation to similar ones, including community attachment (Riger & Lavarakas, 1981) and community satisfaction (Bardo & Hughley, 1984; White, 1985), are considered to be fundamental to the comprehension of community phenomena (Garcia, et al., 1999). These models also detail how the various definitions of community within the literature have influenced the way researchers have sought to understand and measure community.

Sarason (1974) termed sense of community as being characterised by “the perception of similarities 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” (p. 157).

A comprehensive theory for SOC was created by McMillan and Chavis (1986), in which they conceptualised and identified four underlying, interrelated, dimensions of SOC. The first dimension was membership, which had four attributes: boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging and personal investment. The second dimension, the capacity to influence the referent group, also has four attributes: attraction to the community in which one feels one has power, conformity to the community to which one feels belonging, the need for consensual validation within the community and reciprocal and concurrent influence between the individual and community. The third dimension of SOC is the collective meeting of need, that is, the implication that community is distinguished by its capacity to organise for the mutual needs of its members. The fourth dimension, a shared emotional connection, is an affective component based upon opportunities to share, experience, and resolve events through the development of trusting bonds.

The importance of this model is that it demonstrated that an operational definition of the term ‘community’ can be formed, since there is agreement on what living in a community is like, that is, SOC. The model also treated SOC as a multidimensional construct which has been very influential in the consideration of the term ‘community’ as multidimensional as well.

However, research (e.g. Hedges & Kelly, 1992) suggests that SOC is, to a significant extent, setting specific. That is, often the results of these studies cannot be replicated or generalised since their premise was based on the definition of community as a clearly defined geographic locality. Since the conception of SOC’s, researchers have remained unclear about whether it should be a part of the definition of community, or whether it should be considered to be the product of a developmental process that is parallel to the community’s own development (Garcia et al., 1999).

In an effort to incorporate past models of the dimensions underlying community and to foster the comparative analyses of different communities, Puddifoot (1994, 1995, 1996) developed the notion of community identity. Puddifoot (1996) viewed ‘community’ as a positive, meaningful entity that provided order to
Table 1

Elements and Dimensions of Community Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E1: Locus</td>
<td>D1 Members’ own perceptions of boundaries and key topographical/built features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D2 Members’ own perceptions of key social/cultural characteristics of their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D3 Members’ own perceptions of the degree of physical distinctiveness of their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E2: Distinctiveness</td>
<td>D4 Members’ own perceptions of the degree of distinctiveness of key social/cultural characteristics of their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D5 Members’ own perceptions of the special character of their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D6 Members’ perceptions of their own affiliation/belonging/emotional connectedness to location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D7 Members’ perceptions of their own affiliation/belonging/emotional connectedness to social/cultural groups/forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D8 Members’ perceptions of others’ affiliation/belonging/emotional connectedness to location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D9 Members’ perceptions of others’ affiliation/belonging/emotional connectedness to social/cultural groups or forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3: Identification</td>
<td>D10 Members’ own reasons for identifying (or not) with the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D11 Members’ own orientations to their community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E4: Orientation</td>
<td>D12 Members’ own evaluations of the quality of community life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D13 Members’ perceptions of others’ evaluation of the quality of human life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5: Evaluation of community life</td>
<td>D14 Members’ own evaluations of community functioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

everyday life. He assumed that ‘community’ involved living in, belonging to, and having some commitment to a specific area. From a review of the research literature Puddifoot (1994, 1995, 1996) identified 14 dimensions underling community identity, which were then divided into six broad elements. These are summarised in Table 1.

Important features of communities include community services, leisure services, health services, commercial services, economic and other opportunities, the quality of life, the quality of the environment, the quality of decision making, and the ability to influence decisions. Of specific relevance to the present study are the elements of identification, orientation and evaluation of community life, with specific reference to dimensions 6, 7, 10, 11, and 12.

Puddifoot (1996) argued that regardless of the different theoretical perspectives and methodologies, most theorists have come to similar conclusions about the nature of community and its underlying dimensions/concepts. Puddifoot suggests that the term ‘community’ is a multidimensional construct. However, one of the major problems with this model is that it is applicable only to specific geographic areas and localities.
Conceptions of community

Studies have shown that many people now attain their identities and experience feelings of belonging in communities that are not only located within specific geographic areas, but with relational communities as well (Heller, 1989; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sonn & Fisher, 1996). Therefore, the application and measurement of the dimensions of community need to be extended beyond the geographical units such as the block, neighbourhood, community or city to incorporate and examine the relational aspects that may be important to its members (Royal & Rossi, 1996). In order to achieve this, the term ‘community’ needs to be clarified and understood first.

The relationship between community and the models surrounding its measurement has been studied at length in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. While they have been applied with modifications in Australia (e.g., Coakes & Bishop, 1996; Fisher & Sonn, 1999; Rapley & Hopgood, 1997; Sonn, Bishop & Drew, 1999; Sonn & Fisher, 1996), results have been mixed and varied. While these three countries have more communauties than differences, as mentioned earlier, Australia has a different sociopolitical history and geographic infrastructure to both the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Archer, 1997). Furthermore, its geographic isolation, particularly in the case Perth, from other towns, cities and countries (Bishop, et al., 2000), may also be considered an influential factor in the way Australians may conceptualise the term community.

Added to this is the relative newness of Australia as a nation (federation was in 1901) which has implications for the development of community. In the United Kingdom and the United States studies indicate that the longer an individual resides in a community, the more they interact with others residing in the same area, and this in turn influences their feelings and perceptions of how they feel about living in that area (Garcia, et al., 1999). In addition, the locality of residence is often the place of birth of residents, as well as a source of family ties (Puddifoot, 1994). Added to this, the Australian ideology and government policies of multiculturalism have created a space for cultural diversity, which plays an important role in peoples’ perceptions of community.

The issue of urbanisation and distance is also a distinguishing feature between Australia and the United States and the United Kingdom. Australia may be of similar size to the United States, but has only 7% of its total population (Hugo, 1996). Physically Australia is approximately 30 times the size of the United Kingdom, but has only 32% of its total population (Hugo). Within Australia, Western Australia is the largest state, occupying 33% of the total landmass, but comprises only 10% of the total population (Hugo). Additionally, Australia is considered to be the most urbanised country in the world (per capita). The size and distances between major towns and cities may influence how Australians, and people living in the Perth (Western Australia) metropolitan area particularly, view and understand the notion of community.

The Australian, particularly the Perth metropolitan, context of community is unique and comparatively different in geographic size, population density, and demographic profile. Accordingly, the underlying assumptions guiding the present research process is that the meaning and understanding of the term community will differ in Australia from those offered by research in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Method

Research Design

This current research used qualitative methodology to allow an understanding of what the term community means in a contextual, holistic way, (Wiesenfeld, 1997). An interview-based research design was used in order to assess the complexities and processes that emphasised the participants’ frame of reference (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Participants

A purposive rather than representative (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 1990) participant selection process was utilised where adults (over 18) of both genders, at different ages and from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds were sought out to participate. Therefore, the sample consisted of 16 participants, 8 males and 8 females, whose ages ranged from 18 to 68 (M = 38.31, SD = 15.59). The number of interview
Table 2
Broad Concepts and Specific Dimensions Representing Concepts of ‘Community’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCEPT</th>
<th>DIMENSIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Attachment to Place Communality</td>
<td>: shared responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>: shared interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>: shared goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>: shared ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>: shared past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction</td>
<td>: social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>: support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>: helping behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Involvement and Participation</td>
<td>: having a voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>: having influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>: making a contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>: safety and security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>: comfort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

participants was determined when the information elicited reached saturation point (Lincoln & Guba, 1995).

Materials and Procedure
An interview schedule was developed to discover the participants understanding, experiences and interpretation of the term community (see Appendix). The recorded interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously as the data was repeatedly organised and coded according to the conceptual themes that emerged. The themes were derived from the theoretical frameworks, the research question, and each former participant interview. A list of the major ideas, concepts and themes were then member checked (Cresswell, 1994) and resulted in a conceptual model for the emergent theory of understanding the underlying concepts of how participants made sense of the term ‘community’.

Results and Discussion
The aim and objective of this study was to broaden the information base on ‘community’, and to explore the conceptions underlying individuals’ understandings of the term ‘community’. The following vignette is a compilation of participants’ responses and observations about how they responded to the concept of community:

“Community involves where you live, your neighbours, your suburb. On the other hand it also includes a group of people who are bonded together through similar values, beliefs and identity, who do not necessarily live in the same area. People within a community support one another and offer help when it is needed, and they get involved and participate in things that matter within the community. Community also involves the family, since family is a group of people who share a certain commitment together. When a person belongs to a community they feel accepted and loved, and this sense of belonging...
provides a feeling of security and safety. This sense of belonging means that one can feel a connection to more than one group since community is something that is dynamic; its changing all the time depending upon the needs of the individuals within it.”

The concepts that emerged from the data are multidimensional, and reflect similarities and differences to previous findings in related areas, supporting the rationale that West Australians may conceptualise the term ‘community’ differently. However, as the sample only consists of 16 participants further research may verify be needed for verification of the results. A summary of the broad concepts and specific dimensions arising from the interviews are in Table 2.

This conceptualisation of community reflects similarities to those expressed in the literature, comprising ideas and notions expressed by Hillery (1955) and Wiesenfeld (1996) for example. One of the reasons for the similarities may be the fact that each previous definition explored in the literature contained one or more of the concepts of the term community as identified in the present study. While participants in the current study were able to distinguish between their ‘ideal’ community, and the reality of the community to which they felt they belonged, community was overwhelmingly viewed as an important, positive entity. Accordingly, community is a key word that is of considerable importance in society, and a concept that has figured predominantly in discussions of the very nature of society (Wild, 1981).

Geographical Attachment to Place

Geographic attachment to place referred to the ties that participants felt toward their geographic place of residence. According to the data, geographic community, whether it be neighbourhood, suburb, town or city is still a major concept underlying the participants’ understanding of community. Comments included:

“For me community involves where you live, your neighbours”

“I see it [community] as a group who basically live in a suburb”

Upon further analysis, the data revealed that, while all participants were able to identify an aspect of community as geographical, not all personally identified as belonging to a geographical community, as is highlighted by the following:

“With me working at the Fremantle Hospital, you’ve got people that you work with and that’s another part of your life which is still part of community, it’s just a working community”.

The data also suggested that the geographical layout of an area, and its associated environment, play an integral part in everyday life. Furthermore, the length of time participants had lived in a place also determined the extent of their geographical attachment. This is illustrated by the following comment:

“We’ve lived here in Mount Pleasant for a long while now, but before that we were living in a house down the road. We found that we like the area so much that when we decided to move, we decided to pick the same community”.

While one may consider that the neighbourhood is not more than a minor element in the grander concept of community (e.g., Wellman, 1979; cited in Unger & Wandersman, 1985), it still remains an integral part. There is a need to view the link between geographic location and community from alternative points of view in greater detail, and the emergence of this concept from the data has several implications. Firstly, this result highlights the point made by Warren (1963) that social life has to take place somewhere, and any discussion of community needs to have some territorial reference, in order for it to be distinguishable and measurable. Secondly, it indicates the presence of Puddifoot’s (1994, 1995, 1996) first and second elements of community identity, namely Locus and Distinctiveness. However, the results of this study do not distinguish between the various dimensions identified by Puddifoot, possibly because the term community has been conceptualised differently.

Thirdly, it implies that the notion of community does not have to be distinguished as either relational or geographic as previously
argued (Gusfield, 1975; Heller, 1989). The results of the present study indicate that the discussion of the term community may be both geographical and relational, since all participants noted that they belonged to more than one community. This is further supported by the work of Riger and Lavrakas (1981) who divided affective attachment to community into two dimensions: “Physical Rootedness” which refers to the link between people and their physical environment, and “Social Bonding” the link between people and their relational environment. In a recent study, Tartaglia (2006) examined a new model for sense of community and found two factors that represented the affective ties with aspects of the local community, the physical (i.e. Place Attachment), and the relational (Social Bonds). These two factors are consistent with the model of community ties proposed by Riger and Lavrakas. The inclusion of place attachment in Tartaglia’s model supports the territorial and relational dimensions of community.

Communality

Communality is the subjective feeling that people belong together. Data collected suggested that the concept of communality includes the attributes of shared responsibility, shared interests, shared goals, and shared ideas. It is these “common things” that are thought of, by participants, as providing a “bond” and “connection” between people. An example included:

“Community is a group of people who are bonded together through sharing a similar set of values and beliefs and identity…identify themselves as being part of a larger group”

Participants noted that when people live or work in close proximity to one another, or are involved in groups or organisations that meet regularly, they can communicate more frequently about how they view their world and how they cope with it. This point is illustrated by the following observation:

“The more experiences people share the more they can identify with other people… the more that other people can identify with each other”.

Regardless of which community, or how

many communities participants felt that they belonged to, certain elements appear to be essential in a community. These include: a core of commonness or the concept of communality, as identified by participants, that includes a collective perspective, agreed upon definitions, and some agreement about values. Communities are unique social collectives because they provide a context for personal integration (Wild, 1981), and the emergence of this concept supports Puddifoot’s (1994, 1995, 1996) fourth element of community identity, namely Orientation. Furthermore, the results of the present study support components of Wiesenfeld’s (1996) discussion on community, that is, members of a community are committed to the extent of identifying directly or indirectly with the whole, and by having shared rather than just having functional bonds with others.

Social Interaction

Social interaction refers to the degree to which some people engage in social interactions with one another. It is an individual level concept, and factors such as social networks, the availability of support and help, appeared to be very significant when discussing this concept of community. Social networks refer to a person’s overall connections to others with regard to the supportive content of its ties, while social support refers to the various resources that can be provided by supportive interpersonal relationships. Participants noted that this support could be social, emotional or physical. The importance of these factors was stressed by all participants, and is evident from the following remark:

“Community is a group of people that can help you if you ask for it…it is a group of people that can support and help you like the Huntington’s Disease Support Association”.

Furthermore, participants noted that this support was through informal networks, offering them a sense of “togetherness”. As illustrated by this participants’ reflection:

“The good thing about this community is that you get support from one another, being a community and a diverse group of people and especially with your neighbours, you support each other in many ways”

Data suggested that social interaction has a
“buffering” effect, and that the “helping” behaviour of people within the various communities may be identified as resources for helping others to cope with stressors, to promote psychological adjustment and wellbeing, and to improve the overall “quality of life”. From the data it is apparent that the more people interact, the more they tend to develop similar feelings and understandings. As previously stated, these are related to the concepts of communality and sense of belonging since it fostered feelings of being connected.

In relation to results from previous studies (Chavis & McMillan, 1986; Heller, 1989; Royal & Rossi, 1996) and definitions of community (Gusfield, 1975; Hillary, 1955; Warren, 1963; Wiesenfeld, 1996) social support and help are increasingly being found, not just in the local neighbourhood, but through social interaction within social networks. From the results, of the present study, it appears that what brings people together is not just locality, but something common around which social relationships develop. The provision of social support through bonds within the community is a key area of interest for mental health professionals (Riger & Lavrakas, 1981), and the importance of social interaction lies in the fact that social networks provide a mediating structure for society (Heller, 1989). That is, they serve to connect individuals to the larger whole by supplementing interaction with the community, thus, encouraging the fourth concept of active involvement and participation. Previous researchers have indicated that both these concepts are central to any discussion on community and should be included in any definition of the term (Buckner, 1988; Glynn, 1981; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974).

Active Involvement and Participation

Involvement and participation refer to the process by which individuals take part in the decision-making processes of groups or institutions that affect them (Unger & Wandersman, 1995). It is a community level concept, and issues relevant to involvement and participation were particularly emphasised by most participants, even those who did not feel that they were involved, or that they participated in the community. The type and extent of involvement and participation differed among participants, ranging from political participation in community organisations to voluntary action in voluntary associations. Many participants commented that their overall participation within their community depended upon their own and the community’s “needs”. This point is reflected by the following remark:

“I’m comfortable with not doing much in the community, but if I saw a need and I could help in that need then I would do it, but it would depend on the need”.

Data collected suggest that the attributes of having a voice, and having an influence over the community are related, and are considered by participants to be important. This influence appears to be bi-directional, and is illustrated by the following comment:

“Carramar is a really new community and everyone seems to have the feeling where they’re involved with what’s going on within the community … if something happens in the area, well they seem to band together and get everyone’s point of view and what to do about the problem, and that’s great because someone else wants your opinion on what to do.”

Making a contribution was considered to be the impetus behind why many participants were involved and participated within their respective communities. The following observation is indicative:

“Because I feel that I’m active in the community I feel like I’m making some sort of contribution … and it makes me feel good”

Being involved and participating in one’s community, much like the individual level concept of social interaction, are also related to the concepts of communality and sense of belonging.

The concept and related ideas of active involvement and participation are consistent with some of the definitions and theories of community presented in the literature (e.g. Gusfield, 1975; Hillery, 1955; Warren, 1963;
Wiesenfeld; 1996). In addition, it equates to Heller's (1989) third attribute of community – as a collective power, and Buckner's (1988) theory of neighbourhood cohesion, specifically residents' sense of community and attraction to community, and the degree of their social interaction.

The concepts of active involvement and participation also form a major part of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) second and third dimension underlying their definition of sense of community: namely, the capacity to influence the referent group, and the collective meeting of need. According to McMillan and Chavis, these dimensions are of particular importance because they promote social changes, influence self-identity, and impact upon self-efficacy. This concept is also related to Puddifoot's (1994, 1995, 1996) fifth element of community identity, namely Evaluation of Community Life, since it appears that participants used the degree of their social interaction, active involvement, and participation in community affairs as their benchmark for the quality of community life.

Family
Family is a subject that was repeatedly discussed as a constituent of the term community. For all participants, family referred to those people of immediate blood relation, or step families that lived in the same house. The subject of family was considered significant by all participants, particularly with reference to community, since every person interviewed considered family to be part of their 'definition' of community. Comments included:

"...community to me is a lot to do with family, centers on family"

"Coming from an Aboriginal family and growing up with all of my family in Kalgoorlie, community to me would probably be people around me that mean a lot to me ... friends and family"

Data collected indicated that children were identified as influencing the type of social interaction, and community involvement and participation. Children appeared to influence the type of community organisations that people were involved in, as well as the frequency of their involvement. One participant commented:

"When we had kids we did a lot more because you're a lot more involved in the community when you've got youngsters going to school with playgroups, dancing lessons ... once they leave, you don't have the involvement with the community like you used to have".

The data suggests that any discussion of community needs to include the concept of family.

The emergence of 'family' as a central conception underlying the discussion of community indicates the importance of its inclusion in any future discussion or research into the area. Not only does family promote integration into the community, but it also forms the basis of social support and social networks that exist within any community. The significance of this result suggests that friends, neighbours and family be included as concepts in any analysis of community (Bulmer, 1985), since these relationships and associations are often located outside the 'neighbourhood' yet are still considered part of community.

Sense of Belonging
Sense of belonging alludes to feelings of group acceptance and devotion (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). From the analysis of the interview transcripts, it appears that the specific communities to which participants felt that they belonged, was influenced by the way they felt. Overwhelmingly these feelings were of a positive nature, mostly related to feelings of acceptance and a sense of relatedness. This point is highlighted by one participant who suggested that:

"a person who belongs to a certain community would have a greater sense of well-being and happiness and I just think that most people need that sort of sense of belonging"

Data suggested that these feelings were created and maintained by a safe environment, and familiarity with the community to which participants felt they belonged. The issues of safety, security, and comfort were raised by all participants. This is suggested by this remark:

"The ability to identify with a certain group of people is very important and it gives a lot
of people security”
A sense of belonging and a sense of security, safety and comfort are shown to be important positive phenomena for all those living and interacting within a community. It is also apparent from the data that this concept is closely related to the degree of social interaction within a community, as well as being involved and participating at the community level.

Further analysis of the interviews showed a clear presence of some of the elements that make up the definition proposed by Minar and Greer (1968), as well as elements of the sense of community as proposed by Doolittle and MacDonald (1978) and the sense of belonging proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). This concept also highlights Puddifoot’s (1994, 1995, 1996) third element of community identity, namely Identification, with specific reference to dimensions 6 and 7. These dimensions involve participants’ perceptions of their own affiliation/belonging/emotional connectedness to location, and to social/cultural groups/forms. The results indicate that multiple elements are attached to this idea of a sense of belonging, which include safety, security and comfort. Accordingly community is partly based on the subjective feelings that individuals within the community have of belonging together. This concept of sense of belonging is evident in all definitions and models of community within the literature, although its exact nature and relationship to the term ‘community’ remains unresolved.

Transience
The notion of community as transient emerged from the interviews. Transience refers to the ever-changing nature of community, that is, community is seen as dynamic and constantly changing according to the needs of its members. Participants remarked that
“community is something that is dynamic ... its changing all the time”
and
“I think of the Perth community as being a multi-ethnic melting pot of

various races and backgrounds and religions”.
Furthermore, it is apparent from the data that membership within specific communities is also seen as dynamic. In addition to the demands and actions required for community involvement and participation, individuals must simultaneously deal with the many distinct identities that are interdependent by nature. For example, fulfilling the role of family member, student and employee. According to participants, it is this self-identity that allows them to feel a part of more than one community. This issue is illustrated by the following:

“I think my conception of community as it stands is me. I think that there’s a lot of other communities that I would feel that I’m part of, like I feel I’m a part of the university community. I feel like I’m part of the north of the river community, I feel like I’m part of a middle class Australian community. I feel like at times I’m part of the gay community as well as a male community”

Data collected suggested that this notion of the transience may explain why some people identify community as either geographic or relational, or both. For example, a participant explained:
“When I think of community I think about it in terms of religious communities, ethnic communities, communities of belief, ... and then you can look at communities based on location to where you are at a particular point in time, so I guess to me community is all of these things mingled together”

The data suggested that this particular concept is independent of the interrelationships between the other identified concepts. Regardless of how community is defined, or how one feels about belonging to a particular community, it is still seen as constantly changing according to the needs of the individual.

Participants noted that individual differences allow communities to be dynamic and transient in order to facilitate and cope
with change. Durkheim (1964) and Tonnies (1957) discussed the notion of community as something stable that is eroding, as society becomes more modern. The results of this study indicate that contemporary communities and the people within them are capable of changing and adapting, in order to facilitate their needs. Community has not necessarily been eroded, it has simply changed over time.

The findings of the current study raise a series of questions concerning the definitional nature of community which need to be clarified through future research. For example, the way in which participants identified themselves tended to influence the type of community to which they felt they belonged. Further, the extent of the involvement and participation of participants in their communities seemed to influence the extent to which they felt they belonged. The concept of sense of belonging appears to be related to whether community is seen as a positive or negative entity. These relationships need to be explored further.

Future studies could also be undertaken throughout Australia to establish an ‘Australian’ conceptualisation of the term ‘community’ and could advance this study from the individual level to the community level in order to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of the social, cognitive and affective components of community. This may enable a more holistic model of the ‘Australian community’ to be developed.

Conclusion

In Perth, Western Australia, heterogeneity and individual differences appear to be valued, and diversity is encouraged (Bishop, et al., 2000). As previously mentioned, Western Australia, and Perth specifically, appear to be unique due their geographical size and isolation, the demographic composition, and the socio-political history. These may be some of the reasons why participants felt ties to more than one community, and may be unique to this study, since the context in which it was conducted differs from other published theories and research originating in the United States (e.g., Buckner, 1988) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Puddifoot, 1994, 1995, 1996).

It can be seen from the literature and the results of the present study that the concept of community is a multifaceted term (Heller, 1989). People belong to multiple communities bound by the places in which they live and work, the institutions and organisations to which they belong, and by their shared activities with others. For example, the village is a community, so is the city, the neighbourhood, membership in a religious, racial or political group, or membership in a professional organisation. The definitional status of the term community may remain unresolved, but the results of the present study indicate that ‘community’ is a universal concept that is still evolving. It can be concluded from the current study that there are many concepts and issues influencing people’s understandings of the term ‘community’, and it is hoped that future research will aid in qualifying the concepts identified in this study in order to facilitate a greater understanding of ‘community’ in the Australian context.

References


To help think of your understanding of the meaning of ‘community’, other people have indicated that this may include: ties to a geographical area or relational ties to people or groups in other areas around Perth, Australia, or the world.

3. *Prompts and further questions* -
   a) How long have you lived here?
   b) Tell me about your community:
   c) How would you describe your community?
   d) How do you see yourself in the community?
   e) What does your community mean to you?
   f) Tell me about good things in your community
   g) Tell me about bad things in your community - Why do you think that is?

4. *Clarify uncertainties with follow up questions.*

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**Interview Schedule**

The interview schedule is divided into four parts:

1. *Beginning the interview* -
   a) Tell me about yourself (demographic details)
   b) Tell me in your own words what you think of when I say the word ‘community’.
   I have no particular set of questions to ask you. I want you to tell me what the term ‘community’ means to you, and why it is important to you. There is no right or wrong answer. Just tell me in a way that is most comfortable for you

2. *Facilitating recall* -