

Sense of community among university students | research



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The study is primarily aimed at identifying level of sense of community among students who enrolled in the psychology and social work programmes at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu. It was also carried out to investigate whether there were relationships between a sense of community and altruistic behaviour, academic achievement, age, and student's involvement in club or organizational activities. One hundred and fifty one students participated in this study. A questionnaire that comprised of three sections was adapted and further developed to measure the school's sense of community, altruistic behaviour scale, and demographic background of the sample. In this study, membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection as proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) are the subscales for the measurement of sense of community. Rushton's (1981) Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRAS) was used to measure altruistic behaviour. Furthermore, the study attempted to compare the level of sense of community between programmes, gender, ethnicity, and year of study. Age was the only variable found to be correlated with a sense of community. There was no difference found between any of those variables studied.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research was to analyse the university students' sense of community, or their perception towards their school community, which focused on issues pertaining to how much the students perceive the bond between them and the school and its surroundings. Further, the study aimed at identifying whether or not their perception correlated with altruistic behaviour.

The concept of a sense of community as popularly cited in the literature stemmed from Saranson's (1974) idea concerning 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, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. Saranson (p. 157) further adds that the psychological sense of community is one of the major basis of self-definition. Charvat (2004) states that a sense of community is a complex phenomenon because of the fact that the definitions vary from one individual to the next, and from time to time. For example, the Child Development Project at the Development Studies Center in Oakland has defined a sense of community as the student's experience of being a valued influential member of a group committed to everyone's growth and welfare (Schaps, 1998). This concept has been expanded into theories. Among them, McMillan and Chavis's (1986) is so far the most prominent and have been applied by most researchers.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as:

. . . a feeling of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that member's needs will be met through their commitment to be together . . . (in Dalton et al., 2001, p. 193)

McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed that a sense of community is comprised of four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Further explanations on each element are as follows:

Membership

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There are five attributes in the dimension of membership, i. e., boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging and identification with the community, common symbol system, and personal investment. Boundaries refer to the necessity of defining the qualities, such as members' way of dressing, language, and rituals, and even shared goals, that include and exclude non-members. Hence, boundaries are not necessarily clearly or obscurely marked, but the definition can be loose or rigid depending on the community's need to protect its intimate social connection (Wright, 2004). Emotional safety refers to the feelings of security which may involve self-disclosure and group acceptance (Dalton et al., 2001). A sense of belonging and identification with the community looks at the acceptance of being a member of the community. A common symbol system helps to define or indicate membership boundaries and to strengthen the sense of integration among members that could be physically identified or seen, such as wearing the same logo-printed shirts. A symbol is very significant to a community as Nisbet and Perrin (1977, p. 47) quote, ". . . the symbol is the beginning of the social world . . .," which carries the identity of the particular group. Meanwhile, personal investment relates to the long-term commitment to a community, such as devotion of time to activities run by the alumni of a varsity.

Influence

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), influence refers to mutuality of influence in group. This is explained by the bi-directional relationships in a community, whereby members of a group must feel empowered to have influence over what a group does, and group cohesiveness depends upon the <https://assignbuster.com/sense-of-community-among-university-students-research/>

group having some influence over its members (Wright, 2004). However, those who obviously try to dominate the group are often isolated, and the more cohesive the group is, the greater is its pressure for conformity.

Integration and fulfillment of needs

McMillan and Chavis (1986) explain this dimension in two related concepts: shared values and satisfying of needs, and exchange of resources. Members share values which tend to facilitate their interactions and their ability to meet each other's needs simultaneously (Charvat, 2004). Needs are not only understood as survival and the likes, but also include what is desired and valued in a particular community (Dalton et al., 2001).

Shared emotional connection

This element is also explained by the existence of a "spiritual bond" that is based on a shared history among members of the community which could be in the form of behaviour, speech, or any other cues that may not be related to behaviour. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 14) summarised shared emotional connection as, "the definitive element for the true community."

Past studies have shown that having a sense of community has brought several positive outcomes, especially to the community members involved. Positive subjective perception of well-being and participatory problem-solving are among the positive outcomes (Davidson & Cotter, 1993; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Empirical studies on a school's sense of community have brought significant impact to students' academic achievement and social development (Charvat, 2004). The student's experience of school as a

community was found to be associated with prosocial behaviors, including concern for others, altruistic behaviour, and positive interpersonal behaviour, as well as democratic values, skill, and desire, and achievement motivation (Battistich, 2001; Schaps & Lewis, 1999).

From a review of 15 years of research in elementary schools, Charvat (2004) found positive correlations between a school's sense of community and good outcomes for both students and teachers. He added that students who feel a strong school sense of community tend to have more positive attitudes towards school and learning higher educational aspirations, greater trust in and respect for teachers, more prosocial attitude and better social skills. This is also related to teacher attitudes and the perception of school climate.

These findings were similar to that of Solomon et al.'s (2000) which suggested that teacher practices that emphasizes prosocial values, elicitation of student thinking and expression of ideas, encouragement of cooperation, warmth and supportiveness, and reduced use of extrinsic control, were related to student classroom behaviour. Such behaviour includes engagement, influence, and positive behaviour, which, in turn, were related to student's sense of community (see also Schulte et al., 2003).

Research on a sense of community has also been expanded to include a broad range of demographic characteristics. It was reported that a school's sense of community was associated with those who live in the campus, among students in private schools, those out of state, seniors, and females (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1995). Other findings reported that the people who came from small-sized campus and suburban area feel a stronger sense of

community. In a more recent study, Fraering and Minor (2006) for example, have found that there was a positive relationship between age and a perceived sense of community among customers of financial services firms, and men perceive a greater sense of community than women.

Research addressing such issues on a sense of community in Malaysia is still at its infancy. Measuring unity among ethnic groups in Malaysia and efforts in building up as well as promoting national identity perhaps are among studies that the authors can recall to have some connections to the study of sense of community. Looking at how important a sense of community can be in promoting students' well being and development, prompted the undertaking of this research project. For a start, the authors use the sample from their school.

Objectives of Research

To identify the sense of community by various socio-demographic background.

To identify the correlation between frequency of students' involvement in clubs or organization run at school level such as academic achievement, age, and altruistic behaviour.

Hypotheses

1. There is significant difference between sense of community with ethnic group, type of programme, and years of study.

2. There is significant relationship between sense of community with age group, involvement in school, academic achievement, and altruistic behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

One hundred and fifty one students from the School of Psychology and Social Work participated in the study. They were picked at random from each programme that comprised of 52 juniors, 61 sophomores, and 38 seniors.

Design, Tools, and Measurement

The study was designed in survey form. A set of questionnaires comprising of 3 sections was developed and adapted from original sources. Section A measures socio-demographic variables, Section B measures Sense of Community Scale (SOCS) which was adapted from McMillan and Chavis (1986). There are four subscales measured in SOCS as proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). While to measure altruistic behaviour in Section C, Rushton's (1981) Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRAS) was used. For SOCS, 40 items were developed, while SRAS contained 20 items. Both scales were measured through a four- and five-point Likert scales. Cronbach Alpha for both scales ranged between 0.82 and 0.89, indicating that they were highly reliable to be used in the context of this study. In terms of validity, subscales of SOCS significantly correlate to one another and to the whole scale. As for SRAS, it was used before by local researchers in a similar context of this study, and it was found to be valid.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered to the subjects who were picked randomly from each programme with the help of fellow lecturers. They were allowed 15 to 20 minutes to answer the questionnaires.

Data analysis

To test the hypotheses, data were then analysed by one-way ANOVA and Pearson's correlation. Descriptive statistics were applied to see the distribution of the sample.

RESULTS

Background of sample

Descriptive analyses indicated 67 males and 84 females participated in the study that comprised of 34.4 percent of first year students, 40.4 percent second year students, and 25.2 percent third year students. A total of 23.2 percent of them enrolled in the programme for Youth and Community Development, 20.5 percent in Industry and Organizational Psychology, 13.9 percent in Counseling Psychology, 19.2 percent in Child and Family Psychology, and 23.2 percent in Social Work Programme. The mean age of the subjects was 22.01 years. More than 60 percent identified themselves as Malay, 9.9 percent Chinese, 11.9 percent Kadazandusun, 4.6 percent Bajau and Pribumi of Sarawak respectively, and others, 5.3 percent. More than half of the subjects were members of clubs and organizations that were based in the campus, with about 40 percent holding position as committee members of the organizations or clubs. Almost 80 percent have been involved at least two times in activities run by the School. Most of the

students stayed in hostels in the campus. In terms of academic achievement, the subjects can be categorized into three groups. A total of 22 percent are high achievers (with CGPA score of 3.00 and above), 57.3 percent moderate, and 20.7 percent low achievers. The mean score of SOCS was 120.09, indicating the subjects were in the category of moderately high. Table 1 presents some of the socio-demographic data of the samples.

Hypotheses Testing Results

The Pearson product moment correlation analyses showed no significant inter-correlation between a sense of community, altruism, involvement in school or programme activities, and academic achievement. Age was the only variable correlated significantly with a sense of community ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$). Table 2 presents a summary of these findings.

Meanwhile, further analyses showed that there were no differences in the sense of community according to students' year of study, type of programme, and ethnicity. Table 3 summarises the result of one-way ANOVA, while t-test analyses indicated that female and male subjects did not differ in a sense of community.

Table 1: Socio-demographic background of the subjects

Variables N %

Gender

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Male 67 44. 4

Female 84 55. 6

Ethnicity

Malay 95 62. 9

Chinese 12 7. 9

Kadazandusun 18 11. 9

Bajau 7 4. 6

Pribumi of Sarawak 4 2. 6

India 7 4. 6

Others 8 5. 3

Types of programme

Youth and Community Development 35 23. 2

Industry and Organisation Psychology 31 20. 5

Counseling Psychology 21 13. 9

Child and Family Psychology 29 19. 2

Social Work 35 23. 2

Year of study

1 52 34. 4

2 61 40. 4

3 38 25. 2

Table 2: Correlation results between academic achievement, year of study, age, and involvement in school or programme activities, altruism, and sense of community

Sense of community (r value)

Altruism \hat{r} . 08

Academic achievement . 14

Age 0. 23*

Involvement in school activities 0. 10

*p <0. 05

Table 3: Mean differences in sense of community in terms of ethnicity, types of programme, and year of study

Variables	Sum of Squares	Mean of Square	df	F	Sig.
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Ethnicity

Between group 2520.82 420.14 6 0.51 0.80

Within group 95723.20 818.15 117

Types of programme

Between group 699.40 174.85 4 1.23 0.30

Within group 15059.52 142.07 106

Year of study

Between group 703.26 351.63 2 2.52 0.09

Within group 15055.66 139.40 108

DISCUSSION

The findings showed that there was no difference in the sense of community between year of study, ethnicity, and type of programme. It was also found

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that students' involvement in clubs or organizations, academic achievement, and altruism did not correlate with a sense of community. These results contradicted previous findings. The mean for SOCS was in moderately high group, suggesting that it was not strong enough to have connections to other possible phenomena, such as in this case, the academic achievement and altruistic behaviour, as much as for the socio-demographic variables to have some impact on differences of mean in SOCS. In other words, these findings indicated that the students' sense of community could be promoted by other socio-demographic factors that were not studied here.

Only age was found to be correlated with a sense of community. The older the students are, the more they felt attached to the school. Older students normally consisted of those who have faced difficulties in getting a place in a higher learning institution. They might have worked for a while and have experienced repeating national school examinations (referring to the Malaysian Certificate of Education and Higher School Certificate) and competed with other candidates who might have much better grades than they had to enter the university. Once they have the opportunity to enter university, they will make use of it and gain as much advantage as possible to enhance their academic and social development. These students are normally selected or elected as leaders, or at least take part seriously in school clubs or organizations, which inevitably contribute to the building of the school's sense of community.

This study was only a beginning for the authors to understand the nature or level of sense of community among their own students. There are several limitations to this study. The results are applicable only to this sample.
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Hence, the findings are not expected to be generalized. Future studies are warranted to extend the findings to a larger scale, and to students in different disciplines. Secondly, this study only examined the relationship between a sense of community and altruistic behaviour, and differences among a few socio-demographic variables. For future studies, the authors also suggested that researchers examine causal relationship between variables. Perhaps, a longitudinal study could also be conducted to determine whether a sense of community is associated with time change. More studies are still needed to understand this phenomenon better, as community is not stagnant, and will always evolve.

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