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*Sense of Community: Issues and Considerations  
From a Cross-cultural Perspective*

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Sense of Community: Issues and considerations from a crosscultural perspective

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RUNNING HEAD: CROSSCULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

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### Abstract

Behaviour settings such as work, family, church and community are primary settings in which we participate, they provide us with meaningful roles, relationships, and social identities. In fact, these are settings that provide us with a sense of community (SOC). SOC has been heralded as the guiding value for community research and action. It reflects the integration of people into networks and structures that provide feelings of belonging, identification and meaning. The concept has received much attention since the introduction of McMillan and Chavis' initial formulation. It is argued that research into SOC has been hampered by relying on the Sense of Community Index at the expense of the SOC model. Insights are drawn from cross-cultural psychology and research to highlight conceptual issues and to encourage exploration and the utilisation of alternative modes of investigation. Contextualist approaches including substantive theorising and narrative psychology, which have their roots in pragmatism, are promoted as frameworks for bringing community and SOC into focus as central to social and community development.

**Keywords:** Sense of community, cultural psychology, contextualism, etic-emic, individualism-collectivism.

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Los ambientes que se establecen en el trabajo, la familia y la comunidad son ambientes conductuales primarios en los cuales participamos y asumimos roles significativos, relaciones e identidades sociales. De hecho, estos ambientes nos proveen de un sentido de comunidad (SOC). El SOC se ha proclamado como un valor que guía la investigación y la acción comunitaria. Refleja la integración de la gente en redes y estructuras en las que se desarrollan sentimientos de pertenencia, identificación y significado. A este concepto se le ha prestado mucha atención desde su introducción por McMillan y Chavis, quienes hicieron su formulación inicial. Se ha argumentado que la investigación sobre SOC se ha mantenido acorralada por haberse fundamentado en el Índice del Sentido de Comunidad, sacrificando el modelo del SOC. Se han obtenido insights de la psicología e investigación entre culturas para aclarar aspectos conceptuales y para promover la exploración y la utilización de modos alternativos de investigación. Los enfoques contextualistas, incluyendo considerable teorización y psicología narrativa, lo cual tiene sus raíces en el pragmatismo, son promovidos como marcos generales para enfocar la comunidad como eje central en el desarrollo social y comunitario.

#### Sense of Community: Issues and considerations from a cross-cultural perspective

For decades social scientists have been interested in defining community and understanding the impact of social change and other forces on community. Durkheim (cited by Worsley, 1987) argued that solid social ties are essential to one's wellbeing; the absence of ties with family,

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community and other networks increases the risk of anomie and other negative psychosocial outcomes. Tönnies (1955, 1974) also discussed forms of social organisation in his concepts of gemeinschaft and gesellschaft. These notions were developed to reflect the changing nature of society. Others like Marx, Mead, and Weber have all presented perspectives on social systems and the changing nature of these systems (Worsley, 1987). Sarason (1974) introduced the notion sense of community (SOC) and argued that it should be the defining principle of community research and action. He also argued that sense of community is central to wellbeing. SOC reflects “the sense that one belongs in and is meaningfully part of a larger collectivity .... the sense that there is a network of and structure to the relationships ...” (Sarason, 1974, p. 41).

Sarason (1974) essentially argued that if people are integrated into networks in which they can experience belongingness, have meaningful roles and relationships, they will be less likely to experience alienation. This, in turn, would promote psychological wellbeing and quality of life. Many have since shown that sense of community is correlated with a strong sense of identity and psychological wellbeing.

On the other hand, oppression and other processes of cultural and community rejection can have devastating effects on sense of community and psychological wellbeing. For example, Sarason (1974) showed that the removal from families and communities accentuates feelings of rejection and differentness and that the separation attenuates feelings of belonging. Although Royal and Rossi (1996) argued that the lessening of family and neighbour ties has been replaced by networking with people outside the

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immediate geographical locations (i.e., through school and work), Sarason (1974) stated that the rise of mobile societies with 'improved' transportation had been highly destructive of community. Increased transportation has increased mobility, especially for employment, which has led to decreased availability of supportive family networks. In Australia, the nuclear family has been widespread since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of migration, sparse populations and increasing mobility. This has resulted in the nature of community being different from other cultures where there is greater stability. While rural community structure may be more similar to the more stable communities, the structures of urban communities have been based on networks of nuclear families, which are likely not to provide the stability in sense of community that may be found in rural communities and elsewhere. Drawing on the work of Frankfurt school critical theorists including Habermas and Adorno, Sloan (1996) argued that modernisation can lead to loss of sense of community and destruction of the life world, contributing to the increased vulnerability of groups and individuals (Aboriginal Legal Service, 1995).

Since the introduction of the concept there has been a flurry of research activity resulting, for example, in the publication of two special issues of the Journal of Community Psychology (1986, 1996). Much of this research activity has been guided by the definition and theory developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) and, in particular, their Sense of Community Index (SCI) derived from the Sense of Community model. It will be argued that the dependence on the SCI has hampered our understanding of community as a human system and its centrality to human development and

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community. Although these studies have been useful in validating the notion and highlighting its multifaceted nature, researchers have overlooked and under-utilised the framework for both understanding and developing community.

### The sense of community framework

McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a definition and framework to investigate SOC<sup>1</sup> among locality-based and relational communities.

McMillan (1996) revised the framework. They defined SOC 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" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

Their definition of SOC comprised the elements of membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

Membership has five attributes including boundaries, personal investment, sense of belonging and identification, emotional safety, and common symbol systems.

The framework has been used to investigate SOC in localities. It has also been argued that it can be used as a tool in efforts to increase participation and feelings of belonging in communities (Felton & Shinn, 1992; Hunter & Riger, 1986). Some have said that SOC might be the component that holds community development efforts together (Chavis,

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<sup>1</sup> While McMillan & Chavis (1986) referred to psychological sense of community (PSOC), many others referred to SOC. Newbrough (1997) has argued that SOC should be used, rather than PSOC because of its centrality in psychological wellbeing and community.

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1983; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990).

The scope of SOC research has expanded considerably. For example, some studies explored sense of community and its relevance to adolescents (Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996), while Brodsky (1996) used the framework to explore resilience among single mothers. Sonn and Fisher (1996) explored the meaning of SOC of community among 'coloured' South African immigrants to Australia.

The Sense of Community Index (SCI), derived from the SOC model has received some empirical validation (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986), and it has further been suggested that the SOC model can be used to investigate the meanings of community in different contexts (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Since the introduction of the SOC framework and the development of the SCI, researchers have focussed on establishing correlates of SOC within specific urban localities (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Pretty, 1990; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991) and on determining individual-level correlates of SOC in the workplace and school (Royal & Rossi, 1996). Pretty (1990) and Pretty and McCarthy (1991) have investigated the relationship between SOC (using the SCI) and social climate factors in university and organisational settings and reported that levels of involvement, cohesion and support networks correlated with SOC. Consistent with others (e. g., Riger & Lavakras, 1981, Sarason, 1974) these findings reflect the centrality of solid social networks in the experience of community. This is also indicative of the main effects model of social support. That is, the integration into social networks provides opportunities that facilitate feelings of togetherness and meaningfulness, despite stressors.



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These contexts are also important because they provide people with social identities and other social roles. Having a SOC may encourage people to become more involved in their communities, and in this way provide support that can mediate stress (Chavis, 1983). These social networks, in turn, influence quality of life and group wellbeing.

The research into SOC has shown that it is a multifaceted concept that goes beyond the individual. However, it is obvious from this limited review that much of the focus has been on the individual in communities and researchers have relied on the SCI to assess SOC. Hill (1996) stated that SOC needs to go beyond individual behaviours and relationships. She said that “Psychological sense of community is an extra-individual, aggregate variable and we need to put much more effort into measuring it at that level.” (p.437). Puddifoot (1996) also emphasised that SOC research has been individualistic in their focus and have largely ignored family and social structure. In relying on the SCI, researchers have simplified the notion and neglected the development of the framework as a heuristic to inform our understanding of community and the processes that foster SOC and human development.

Moreover, the use of SCI implies that SOC and community are to be treated as individual-level variables. The notion of community is largely ignored, other than as a referent for the individual. Implicit in much research is the basic individual differences model. For example, psychological wellbeing has been found to be correlated with the SCI. In other words, varying levels of SOC are related to outcome measures, such as psychological wellbeing. Royal and Rossi (1996) looked at SOC in the work place and school.

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While making some contrasts between schools and work situations, studies such as these use individual differences in SOC as a methodological framework. In doing this, the work or school situations do not become the focus of study, but become the backdrops for the individuals' SOC. The assumptions behind this type of research are evident in a highly industrialised First World which places a premium on the ideology of individualism. In an indigenous community, however, the concept of who has a greater sense of community may have no meaning.

The use of individual difference approaches does not allow us to address Sarason's (1986) comment that "the lack of a sense of community was extraordinarily frequent ...(and was) a destructive force in living and ... dealing with its consequences and prevention should be the overarching concern of community psychology" (p. 406). The implication of Sarason's comments is that community psychology should be concerned about how we can prevent people from experiencing a lack of community. The situation Sarason presents is a bifurcation in society between those who have a sense of community and those who do not, similar to Opatow's (1990) concept of moral inclusion and moral exclusion. Moral exclusion "occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundaries in which moral values, rules and considerations of fairness apply." (Opatow, 1990, p.1). Research and practice in community psychology should be addressing those who do not have a sense of community, who feel morally excluded: the oppressed, the alienated and the stigmatised. Research models that emphasise individual differences models can be seen to trivialise issues of oppression and marginalisation. It is akin to studying poverty by

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contrasting the poor with middle classes, and with the rich and very rich. The issue of the overcoming poverty gets lost. Sarason's comments bring community psychology back to the need to address social justice issues and social change. Justice needs to be a central concept. In recent years it has become apparent that while social justice is a core value in community psychology it has not received the attention it deserves (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). It has assumed that social justice agendas are realised through reflective and transformative practice when in fact the evidence suggests that social justice as a guiding principle has fallen into the background. Research methods that do not directly address issues of social injustice need to be rethought. It is clear, moreover, that changes in community cannot be observed using an individual differences research model.

The concept of SOC, as operationalised by Chavis, et al. (1986) has been roundly criticised by Dunham (1986) as being more a measure of group cohesion, and leading to the imposition of utopian ideals. Dunham argued that the failure to address community has led to the uncritical acceptance of a utopian view of community that requires a totalitarian government structure to implement. He argued that the quest for this utopian ideal would be at the expense of democracy. The use of individual differences models does not allow comment to be made on the nature and strength of community. It is only through historical and /or cross-cultural reflection that the qualitative nature of community can be observed. It will be argued that this approach is central to research on SOC.

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### Context-bound and beyond

The process of transferring theories, concepts, and measurements from one context to another has been criticised for ignoring meanings that are context dependent (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992; Moghaddam, 1987; Moghaddam & Struder, 1997, Shweder, 1992). This form of 'centrism' is a core criticism of both cross-cultural and traditional psychology which often assumes that which is true in one context will also be true in a different context (Eckensberger, 1979; Shweder, 1992, Shweder & Sullivan, 1993). This tension is, in part, evident in the debate about the extent to which aspects of human functioning are universal or culture specific (Adomopolous & Lonner, 1994; Lonner & Adomopolous, 1997). It is also reflected in the discussion of etic and emic forms of research. According to Berry et al. (1992), etic or culture-general research assumes that behaviour is common and independent of culture. This assumption often leads to the importing and testing of concepts developed in one context to another. Emic or culture-specific research on the other hand involves the idea that behaviour and functioning is interpreted in the cultural context in which it occurs. In the case of emic research, psychological explanations consider local frames of reference and cultural knowledge in interpreting the social and psychological realities of groups, and should be open to the discovery of new ways of being.

The criticisms of importing and testing concepts unquestioningly and assuming universality is also valid for research that has assumed that the components of SCI and its meanings are universal and will be similar across settings and contexts. That is, SOC has been treated as etic with little

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consideration given to the social and cultural realities of the groups involved and how this may influence SOC. Although, studies have demonstrated empirically that the various components of SOC manifests itself across settings, the underlying assumptions about the meanings elicited by the items have remained unexamined. That is, it has often been assumed that participants draw on the same meaning systems to respond to items.

It must be acknowledged that the SCI allows one to change referents depending on the context of ones research. Although the referents can be changed from school to work place, the stems of the items remain unchanged. On the surface, this appears to be good practice because altering the items supposedly contextualises the research. However, this is not the case because the underlying assumption is that the way people relate to their communities and the significance of those communities will be consistent across contexts. It is assumed that items developed to assess SOC in a North American neighbourhood block or block association will be appropriate to assess SOC in any other context in any other group. Yet, cultural, historical and contextual differences are not acknowledged with this limited adaptation of the instrument. Communities are more than structures and are constructed by their members and a combination of social, political, economic, and cultural factors. It follows that community and the experience of community should reflect and be understood in terms of the sociocultural reality of the particular group.

It is therefore important to employ techniques that allow us to capture the reality of particular groups and articulate or express those in terms of local frames of reference and systems of meaning (Greenfield,

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1997; Shweder, 1992). It is equally important to acknowledge that SOC may look different and be derived from different sources for different groups.

Research and writings on worldviews (Nobles, 1990) and cultural syndromes (Triandis, 1995, 1996) supports the idea that people have different meaning systems that influences many facets of daily living. For example, Triandis (1996) stated that “a cultural syndrome is a pattern of shared attitudes, beliefs, categorization, self-definitions, norms, role definitions, and values that is organized around a theme that can be identified among those who speak a particular language, during a specific historic period, and in a definable geographic period” (p. 408).

Individualism and collectivism are examples of cultural syndromes which reflect the different ways in which groups are socially and culturally organised. These different patterns of organisation mean that groups have different ways of relating to and interacting with their environment, and they draw on different sources for identity, belongingness and wellbeing (Triandis, 1995).

#### Sense of community: Process and Outcome?

Cross-cultural psychologist and cultural researchers (e. g., Berry et al., 1992; Greenfield, 1997; Moghaddam & Struder, 1997; Shweder, 1992) have struggled with the challenges associated with employing reductionistic techniques to explain the links between culture and human behaviour.

Mankowski and Rappaport (1995) have alluded to a similar issue that exists for those interested in the relationship between individual and community.

This issue is evident in some research designed to gain insight into SOC.

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By relying on the SCI, it has been assumed that the sum of the parts will provide an indication of the overall SOC for a particular group. It is assumed that “community may be understood by simply adding up the tendencies of its members” (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995). This process has been referred to as the ecological fallacy. Assessing SOC in this way allows us to gain insight into some of the components of community and SOC as a variable. However, as with culture, it can be argued that the whole is larger than the sum of its parts and in order to understand community, we need to also understand what it means to be part of a particular context or community. That is, we need to go beyond the components of community and explore the shared understandings group members have of their communities and the processes that foster community and lead to community formation. Felton and Shinn (1992) argued that we need to move social support beyond the individual. In a similar vein we need to move SOC beyond the individual. Exploring it as a process may move us one step closer to that goal.

Others have argued along similar lines. For example, Weisenfeld (1996) draws on the notion of tacit or taken for granted knowledge about the world to explain the overarching unexamined assumptions that are part of a SOC. She referred to these as macro-belongings, that is, “Members shared meaning attributed to the world because they share the experience of events occurring in a common space and time (p. 342)”. This idea reflects the importance of a shared history and experience, and emotional ties in community. Similarly, Puddifoot (1996) mentioned the idea of a social map, that is, patterns of relationships and attachments to roots as central to

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community. These notions are not captured by the SCI, but can be captured by methods that are more sensitive to process and cultural realities. This does not, however, mean that the SCI can not be used. On the contrary, if adapted and used in combination with data gathering techniques sensitive to the realities of the context a deeper understanding of SOC may well follow. The following criticism of the unquestioning use of the SCI is not designed as a critique of the instrument itself -- but as a vehicle to look at SOC using a cross-cultural perspective.

### Insights from cultural research for SOC and community research

Research and writings in cultural and cross-cultural psychology on ethnicity and ethnic group formation can inform our understanding of the processes involved in community development, community formation, and SOC. A strong theme through these writings is the idea that shared history, symbols, and common stories are central to the process of community construction and the maintenance of community boundaries. Nagel (1994) wrote that “culture is constructed in much the same way as ethnic boundaries are built, by the actions of individuals and groups and their interactions with the larger society” (p. 162). She went onto suggest that groups can reconstruct and create their culture through processes of revival and cultural reconstruction. Cultural revisions and innovations occur when current cultural elements are changed or when new cultural forms or practices are created. Through these processes community is constructed, boundaries created, and shared meanings realised.

Both tacit knowledge and shared history are part of McMillan and



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Chavis (1986) notion of shared emotional connection. They stated that “future research should focus on the causal factor leading to shared emotional connection, since it seems to be the definitive element for true community” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 14). In our view shared history and systems of meaning are foundational in the development of a SOC. The importance of shared history and experiences was illustrated by Sonn (1996) who investigated SOC community among an immigrant group to Australia. His research showed the history, experiences, and symbols that a group shares provide the foundations for cultural revival and reconstruction; it provides the foundation for developing SOC. Therefore we need to allow SOC to be an open ended construct so that both history and context can inform its shape and function.

### Summary and possible directions

In this paper it has been argued that the unquestioning use of the SCI has resulted in the underutilisation of the SOC framework as a guide for community research. Because of the uncritical use of the instrument our understanding of SOC has been individualist and reductionist and insufficient attention has been given to understanding community as a human system central to development. It was also suggested that SOC research guided by the SCI have not carefully analysed how different worldviews may influence the character and functioning of SOC.

In line with McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) initial vision for SOC, it is proposed that researchers reconsider the potential of the framework as a heuristic to inform research into community because of community’s

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centrality to human development. In pursuit of this goal important questions need to be considered, including how we investigate community and community functioning, what assumptions underlie our questions and research strategies, and how we understand the people in context. Lorion and Newbrough (1996) provided some direction in stating that:

The field's responsibility to the social sciences and to the public in general is to understand and apply the processes that maximise the development and efficacy of "true community". To get there, we may need to shift our direction to move ourselves closer to our subject matter, i. e., real people in real settings dealing with real circumstances. The shift requires sufficient faith in our science to allow the subject matter and our understanding of it to determine, in part, methods appropriate to its study and change (p. 313-314).

Perhaps cross-cultural psychology and cultural research can inform the study of SOC as an extra-individual phenomena. By coupling our commitment to enhance sense of community with techniques and procedures that allows SOC to emerge from and be influenced by the context we will be in a better position to achieve this commitment.

There are many examples of research that have endeavoured to understand people in context. For example, Pretty and Chipuer (1997) have used qualitative interviews with youth in everyday social settings to explore the meaning of SOC in Australia and Canada. Hughes and DuMont (1993) argued for using group interviews as a strategy that can facilitate anchoring

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the investigation of social and psychological processes in the norms, values, and experiences of groups. Cheng (1990) challenged the basic assumption of individualism in his exploration of the East Asian personality. He started his investigation of the East Asian personality with assumptions of personality and social behaviour derived from Confucian ideology. Together, these studies reflect different levels of, and strategies for, culturally grounding research.

Sinha's (1997) discussion on indigenising psychology offers some insight into the levels at which we can start to ground exploration of social and psychological phenomena in the realities of groups. These levels include focussing on the issues of the community, deriving concepts from the local context, reinterpreting existing concepts in the new context, and developing culturally appropriate and meaningful data collection strategies (Sinha, 1997). In addition to these levels of localising inquiry, Greenfield (1997) specified different qualitative and narrative methods that can be used for understanding processes and meanings.

Also methodological innovations from community psychology offer promise of redressing many of the concerns raised in the foregoing discussion (see Tolan, Keys, Chertok, & Jason, 1990). For example, Wicker's (1989) description of substantive theorising explicitly locates research and practice within the substantive domain of interest. Similarly, Mcguire's (1994) perspectivism and Cook's critical multiplism (1985) argue that any phenomena such as SOC should be viewed from a variety of perspectives within a contextual matrix (see also Dokecki, 1996). From their point of view SOC is indeed an emic which must be construed from within.

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In doing so the nature of knowledge is also recast. Knowledge about SOC and its role in understanding community is a social construction which contributes, not to a universal knowledge base, but rather to the discourse about the nature of SOC in community. From this perspective it becomes possible to pursue Sarason's quest for ameliorating alienation and marginalisation for those in community without SOC. While there has been an impressive array of methodological alternatives, it has also become apparent that it is difficult to translate them into viable research programs. Payne (1996) offers an approach derived from the same heritage of concerns which goes further to offer an explicit research strategy.

Payne (1996) outlined an approach to contextualism that is based in Dewey's and, more recently, Pepper's (1942) pragmatism. The focus of this approach is on understanding meanings in context, that is, how do people perceive their environments and how can that inform our understanding of community. Drawing on Pepper's work, Payne argued that contextualist investigations start with events and should be guided by the concepts of quality, strands, textures and references. Although these concepts will not be elaborated here suffice it to say that they provide the tools to guide the investigation of events and psychological processes as they occur in settings.

This approach is consistent with the directions offered by researchers that have promoted holistic modes of inquiry. For example, Rappaport (1993, 1995) highlighted the potential of a narrative approach to understanding and giving voice. Narratives, according to him, are stories that are not unique to individuals but common among a group of people. A group of people with a shared narrative can be seen as a community.

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Rappaport argued that SOC can be construed as a shared narrative that can be fruitfully understood by analysing shared stories and rituals of a particular group. This is consistent with contextualism as methodology in that it emphasises understanding lived experience in a holistic sense, and pays particular attention to the influences of context.

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### Biographies

Christopher Sonn is a lecturer in Psychology at Edith Cowan University. He teaches cross-cultural and community psychology at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. His research interests include sense of community, migrant adaptation, community resilience, and qualitative methodologies.

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Neil Drew is lecturer in psychology at Edith Cowan University. He has a strong interest in loss of trust and confidence in government and has researched reinvesting trust and confidence by attending to matters of procedural fairness. Prior to joining Edith Cowan University he worked for some time on the development of community based programs for young offenders.