

**IMMIGRANT ADAPTATION: UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS  
THROUGH SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

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There is a wealth of literature that illustrates the centrality of natural social and support systems for individual and community wellbeing.

Sarason (1974) introduced the notion of psychological sense of community (SOC) and argued that it is central to well-being because it reflects membership and interrelationships with a wider body of people. He emphasized that the removal of people from families and communities can lead to feelings of rejection and undermine feelings of belonging. There is evidence for the negative outcomes that result from the loss of primary communities and the systematic removal of cultures because of oppression and colonization (e.g., Bulhan, 1985; Moane, 1999; Sloan, 1996).

Immigration, voluntary or involuntary, is a transition that often entails the severing of community ties, the loss of social networks and familiar bonds -- it can mean the loss of taken for granted sources and systems of meaning. Many have discussed the negative social and psychological challenges and outcomes associated with immigration and settlement in unfamiliar environments (e. g., Berry, 1997; Birman, 1994; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ogbu, 1994; Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999). Although the process of migration-adaptation is a challenging experience, it can also mean hope for a better future, safety, and security for many individuals and groups. Indeed, individuals and

groups may not always respond in negative ways and instead may adapt social and support systems based on the home culture to the new culture. The adaptation of these social and support systems are central to the settlement process and provides the context for the experience of belonging and identification. In this chapter I explore the role of sense of community in migrant adaptation. It is suggested that social systems and other settings within migrant groups are central to the adaptation process as they provide opportunities for meaningful social engagement and participation in social roles. These settings can be conceptualized as activity settings (O'Donnell, Tharp, & Wilson, 1993) in which people spend time together and have opportunities and access to resources that facilitates the integration of identities and cultures into the new context. Migrant groups create these settings that foster a sense of community, which, in turn, serves a protective function for members and also facilitates the adaptation process.

#### Acculturation, Adaptation, and Settings

There is a wealth of research that documents the social and psychological implications of crosscultural transition and adaptation. Intercultural contact often requires migrants to negotiate group boundaries and identities and make adaptations to meet the demands and challenges of the new contexts. In these contexts migrant groups

often find themselves in minority positions and this has implications for the way in which they adapt and negotiate their ethnic and cultural identities.

Different researchers (e. g., Berry, 1984, 1997; 1998; Birman, 1994; Bulhan, 1985; Tajfel, 1981) have offered models to understand individual and community responses to intergroup contact. Berry's (1997) model of acculturation and migrant adaptation contains four common responses to intercultural contact, including integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation. These responses are characterized by shifts in attitudes and behavior toward one's own and other communities. The different responses are also characterized by different mental health outcomes with integration being the most favorable and marginalisation the least. There is general agreement among these models that those who are rooted in their home culture report better social and psychological wellbeing compared to those who are not (Lafromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). For example, McCubbin, Futrell, Thompson, and Thompson (1998) discuss research showing that participation in ethnic community activities and strength of ethnic identification has positive links with self-esteem and wellbeing. Ghaffarian (1998) found support for the bicultural hypothesis that those who hold onto their home culture while adopting the host culture report better health outcomes.

Although these models have been useful in understanding the acculturation and adaptation processes and outcomes for individuals and groups, they are problematic, over simplified and often do not examine the dynamics of adaptation from the perspective of the communities (Bhatia & Ram, 2001). The focus has been largely on understanding individual-level factors that impact settlement in a mechanistic manner and little attention has been paid to understanding how groups respond internally to the challenges of transition through forming and adapting social and support systems developed in the home country to the new context. These social and support systems may be thought of as activity settings (O'Donnell, Tharp, & Wilson; 1993), that provides the contexts in which valued cultural identities are protected and propagated and the realities of the new context negotiated. Individuals and groups may form social and support systems in which members can engage in valued patterns of social interaction and forms of engagement. These social and support systems provide opportunities for the experience of community that is important for the social and psychological wellbeing of individuals and groups.

Activity settings are the basis for social processes common to participants that lead to shared systems of meaning and understanding, experiences, and ways of relating to the world. Expanding on Barker's

notion of behavior settings, O'Donnell et al. (1993) contended that activity settings differ from behavior settings by "including an account of subjective experience, cognition, and characteristics of individuals, by having specific relationships to other activity settings, ..." (O'Donnell et al., 1993, p. 504). Gallimore, Goldenberg, and Weisner (1993, Gallimore, & Goldenberg 1993) offered their understanding of activity settings, which is couched in ecocultural theory, suggesting that they are in part social constructions, and they moderate and mediate the impacts of social systems on people. Thus, activity settings provide the contexts in which various histories, experiences, and ideologies converge and people make sense of their individual and cultural identities and everyday experiences.

It can be argued that the settings serve both protective and integrative functions for individuals and communities. For example, Sonn and Fisher (1996) have shown that settings within minority groups play a central role in providing people with opportunities for social engagement and identity development. These settings included church groups, sporting and social organizations, and other similar networks that provide opportunities for people to experience security, stability, belongingness, acceptance, and equality. The settings may be embedded in communities which are embedded within a broader ecological context. In addition to providing group members with opportunities to meet social and

psychological needs, there are also opportunities for the development of skills and competencies required to function effectively in and contribute to the new society. In essence, these settings provide members with an opportunity to experience a SOC that is important for wellbeing and identity.

### Social Support and Ethnic Communities

There is a strong literature base that shows the benefits of social and support systems for people (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985; Levine, & Perkins, 1997; Orford, 1994). Social and support networks and systems can contribute to psychological wellbeing and improved quality of life through a main or direct effect and as a stress buffering mechanism. According to the main effects hypothesis of social support, support enhances health or wellbeing regardless of the stress encountered. Socially supportive functions occur because people are socially integrated into and embedded in communities that provide opportunities for social engagement, identities and social roles. Because people are embedded in protective systems, they are less likely to experience the negative psychological outcomes associated with stress. The stress buffering effect results when support systems intervene between the stressful event and the stress experience. Thus, support may facilitate the redefinition or reduction of perceived harm or threat, and may contribute to a persons

ability to cope with stressors (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Heller and Swindle (1983) suggested that support may operate in two ways, as perceived and received. Perceived support is the belief that support will be available when one needs it, while received support means people provide direct support to help others cope with stressors.

The severing of these networks and the removal of interpersonal and sociocultural supports that may follow migration can contribute to negative social and psychological health outcomes for individuals and groups (Caplan, 1964; Krupinski, 1984). While these outcomes may follow the immigration process, chances for successful settlement in the new country may be enhanced if individuals and groups have access to social and support systems including those that are based on the home culture. For example, the literature shows that ethnic groups are central to the adaptation and settlement process because they fulfil similar functions as communities for group members (Cox, 1989). According to Cox (1986), "Within the familiar surroundings of the ethnic group, the immigrant or minority group member will usually find acceptance, common interests, opportunities to give and receive and a sense of belonging" (p.147). The important roles of these groups are further illustrated in the research on ethnic and racial identity development in culturally plural contexts that show these groups provide members with a sense of ethnic belonging that

is psychologically important as it serves as an anchor for individual relatedness (e.g., Berry, 1986, 1997; Birman, 2000; Phinney, 1990; Smith, 1991). In terms of the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model, it can be argued that these settings provide members with opportunities for identification and to meet social and psychological needs for belonging and relatedness. In these settings people can validate their experiences and perceptions of the social world and develop skills, knowledge and competencies to negotiate the challenges of the new country.

#### Sense of Community: Lessons from Immigrants in Australia

There are numerous studies that have explored the antecedents and correlates of SOC in urban settings in North America. There are also a growing number of studies reporting antecedents and correlates of SOC in other countries (chapter one). Our research has focused on applying SOC to understand migrant settlement (Fisher & Sonn, 1999; Sonn, 1996; Sonn & Fisher, 1996; Sonn, Fisher & Bustello, 1998). To date, we have been interested in understanding the nature of SOC in ethnic groups to develop our understanding of the way in which individuals and groups transfer a SOC developed in one cultural context to another through social and support systems and the implications of this for settlement.

In one of the research studies we explored SOC among coloured South Africans to Australia. Coloured South Africans were so classified under the Apartheid system in South Africa and included people of mixed African and European ancestry as well as Asians. The first stage of that research used in-depth ethnographic interviewing to gather information about people's understandings and experiences of their communities in South Africa. An interview schedule derived from the SOC model guided the interviewing process. The research findings revealed that SOC operated differently for that community. It was argued that the SOC model operated at two levels. One level reflected the external imposition of group membership under Apartheid in South Africa. The other related to the way in which the community responded to the Apartheid system and included the way that people socially constructed notions and experiences of community within settings in their group. It was argued that the group resisted the imposition of racial identity labels and displaced experiences of community to other settings. These settings were conceptualized as activity settings and included social and sporting clubs, church-based groups, and family and extended social networks that developed in the community. These activity settings provided people with positive experiences of belonging, strategies for resisting racial prejudice and oppression, and opportunities to participate in meaningful social roles and

activities. In essence the settings provided people with opportunities to experience community and to make sense of their lives within the broader social system.

The first study provided the basis for subsequent research in which we explored the ways in which SOC is transferred from one cultural context to another through social and support systems. Our specific questions included investigating the nature of SOC for an immigrant community that we viewed as a relational community. Ninety-seven South African immigrants to Australia were surveyed. The survey contained measures that recorded demographic information and assessed sense of community, ethnic identification, and wellbeing (as measured by the General Health Questionnaire 30, Golberg & Williams, 1988; McDowell & Newell, 1987).

McMillan and Chavis' (1986) formulation guided the study and the Sense of Community Index (SCI) was adapted to assess SOC. In line with arguments in cultural and community psychology (e. g., Hughes, Williams, & Seidman, 1993; Sinha, 1997, Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999), interview data collected in the qualitative study facilitated the development of culturally grounded items and adaptation of the SCI to assess SOC in this group. Some items in the survey had different referents and additional items were developed. Examples of adapted items included: "Very few

South Africans in Australia know me”, “Most South Africans in Australia share the same values about family togetherness”, and “It does not matter to me what South Africans think of me when I socialize with them”.

Additional items included; “I feel the South African group I socialize with accepts me as a member” and “South Africans are very supportive in times of emotional challenges”.

Among other questions in the survey, participants were also asked to indicate the settings in which they socialized with South Africans most frequently. About 37% of the sample of 97 said that they socialized with others in a sporting club, 14 % said a social club, and 34% suggested other settings including work. Some said that they did not socialize with South Africans at structured events on a regular basis.

#### The Nature of Sense of Community

In order to clarify the nature of SOC for this community, an exploratory principal-axis factor analysis with oblique rotation was conducted. In line with Mcmillan and Chavis' (1986) argument and subsequent research (see Hill, 1996) confirming the multidimensional nature of SOC, we identified four factors. The nature of the items that loaded onto the factors showed that the SOC model worked differently for this group and the elements contributed differentially to SOC.

The first factor contained items that assessed preference to socialize with South Africans, the desire to form social ties with South Africans, the importance of maintaining the culture and traditions. The factor was interpreted as Shared emotional connection and reflected quality social networks and a shared background. Participants typically suggested that they enjoyed being with other South Africans because of a sense of familiarity. Participants also felt that keeping informed about South Africa increased their identification with the community. When with fellow South Africans, participants felt that they had the opportunity to reminisce and share stories about their lives in South Africa and Australia. There is a shared connection implicit in the familiarity that was assumed and taken for granted once people clarified their shared origin -- South Africa.

The shared emotional bond that is evident can be likened to Tönnies (1955, 1974) *Gemeinschaft* and Leighton's (1959) shared sentiments. *Gemeinschaft* is based on "well-defined habits of reunion and shared custom." (Tönnies, 1974, p.10). In our research, this reflects the experiences and understandings of community that people internalized in the home country-- their shared community story (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; 2000). This is consistent with Leighton's shared sentiments that also indicate shared understandings and ways of being. In

Australia, the shared cultural understandings engender a symbolic identification with similar others.

The second factor contained items assessing aspects of Influence. Specifically, the items reflected aspects of individual and group control over behavior. In the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model this element is transactional reflecting three levels of influence; 1) within the group, 2) the group's influence on the person, and 3) the group's influence on external structures. This transactional nature of control was not evident in our research. However, the factor did point to levels of control and conformity within the group. Specifically, it pointed to the perceived control that people feel they have over others and the perceived control the group may have over members' behavior. In the settings there are pressures for members to conform to expectations of the community while at the same time members may try to influence others in the group.

The third factor included items that reflected some of the benefits associated with group membership and constituted integration and fulfilment of needs. The items that loaded onto the factor suggested that participants felt accepted by the community, members in the group got along with each other, they felt comfortable with each other, and they shared values about family togetherness. In our interpretation the

questions that loaded onto the factor suggested that ethno-cultural social networks can play a positive role in the experience of community.

The factor also suggests that an important need met through socializing with members of an in-group. In the settings people have the opportunity to ensure the continuity of their cultural community, which, in turn, is central to the maintenance of an ethnic identity. This is to say that people have an opportunity to maintain and propagate valued cultural stories and traditions in different settings. However, it is important to note that socializing with members of an in-group does not preclude socializing with the broader community or people in other settings. In fact, participants indicated that they valued the bicultural networks they had established. Thus, although connection with others from the same group is important in providing safety and opportunities for social identity development, it also linked people with the broader sociocultural context. Two items that assessed perceived tangible and subjective support loaded onto the fourth factor. The factor reflected perceived support, that is, the belief among people that they could depend on each other for different forms of social support.

This analysis show that SOC can be applied to understand the way in which people transfer SOC from one context to another through support systems. Key elements of the model were identified and shown to operate

differently. The experience of SOC for people seems to be dependent on the social, political and cultural context. It also seems that shared history and experiences, and a shared sense of traditions is central to sense of community. In our work it was clear that the everyday taken for granted understandings of community that was constructed and internalized in South Africa provided much of the basis for the structuring of settings and events in the new contexts. That is, the shared understandings and meanings associated with community form the basis of the emotional connections that people have with each other in the Australian context. The SOC that is transferred to the new context and propagated in social settings is important for the development of social identities.

#### Sense of Community and Ethnic Identification

Much of the research investigating migrant adaptation, acculturation and intergroup contact have focused on understanding the implications for identity development and maintenance and mental health. In these contexts migrant groups often find themselves in minority positions. The transactions between the host and migrant groups require newcomers to negotiate group boundaries and make adaptations to meet the demands and challenges of the new contexts. These adaptations are often reflected in terms of ethnic and cultural identities.

Definitions of ethnicity and ethnic identification suggest that aspects of sense of community are central to the sense of belonging and feelings of 'we-ness'. For example, Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1991) defined ethnicity as: "a characteristic of shared unique cultural

traditions and a heritage that persists across generations” (p. 292).

According to Phinney (1996), there are three aspects of ethnicity that may account for its psychological importance. These include: 1) the cultural values, behavior and attitudes that distinguish groups, 2) the subjective sense of ethnic group membership that is held by group members, and 3) the experiences associated with minority status, including powerlessness, discrimination and prejudice. Thus, ethnic groups provide members with opportunities for belonging and the propagation of valued traditions, stories, and identities. These stories, traditions and sentiments have emotional significance and is important for identification and belonging.

The links between ethnic and national identification and sense of community were investigated. In order to assess ethnic identification, we asked participants about the extent to which they identified as ‘coloured’ and as South African, using a Likert-type scale. Regression analyses revealed that the shared emotional connection was a strong predictor of both ethnic and national identification explaining 19% of the variance for ethnic identification and 11% for national identification. Influence and Integration and Fulfilment of needs contributed 6% each to the equation that predicted ethnic identification, but did not contribute to national identity.

For this group the ethnic identity label coloured is used in an associational manner, as a shorthand descriptor for people who have a shared history and group membership. It serves the positive function of bringing people together around shared understandings and experiences

they have in common. In a sense the label is a shorthand index to the a deeper community narrative that is based on the lived experiences and memories of life in 'coloured' communities in South Africa (e.g., Mankowski & Rapport, 2000; Rappaport, 1995, 2001). In the freer context the label has a different function and people feel that they own the identity label and can create new and positive meanings for the label. In the freer context, the label is not part of a system in which racial group membership is used to determine life opportunities. This is not to say that all participants used or identified with this label. Some participants used national identity (South African) as an indicator of identity. However, this label is mostly used as a marker to identify oneself to those who are not members of the in-group.

## General Conclusions

### Sense of community and settings

Activity settings within the immigrant community emerged as a central context for interaction with similar others. Settings such as churches, extended family networks, and sporting clubs provided the contexts within which people could participate, perform meaningful social roles, share stories, and develop skills and competencies to function in the broader society. These settings appear to be central to the successful responses to transition and change. Together with the literature on social and other support systems our research suggests that activity settings may be a useful notion for understanding social psychological phenomena such as sense of community. In a sense the settings provide the context

for cultural continuity, and the adaptation and creation of new stories and symbols of identity and community. 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 also wrote that groups can reconstruct and create their culture through processes of revival and cultural reconstruction. In much the same way SOC can be construed as both process and outcome emerging from peoples active engagement in the settlement process. This active process of community and identity making can be understood by exploring how cultural scripts, histories, and experiences are adapted and how the demands of the new context are negotiated. Thus, by thinking of adaptation as a process of community-making within a social, historical, and political context we may be better placed to understand the complexity and depth of the settlement experience.

There is a risk that the promotion of ethno-specific settings may lead to exclusion and separatism. This is not necessarily the case because these settings reflect an adaptation to a new social ecology and the creation of settings for social engagement. The settings provide the contexts in which cultural identities, histories, and other social identities can be affirmed, but they do not necessarily mean separation from the broader social system. For example, some social and cultural needs may be met in these settings, while people meet economic needs through participation in the broader society.

Furthermore, it has been argued that exclusion and separatism are more likely to occur in situations where intergroup relations are characterized by unequal power relations and oppression, and where group boundaries are perceived as impermeable (Tajfel, 1981). In those situations minority group identities and cultural boundaries are used as dimensions for exclusion and derogation requiring those groups to develop strategies for maintaining positive identities. Therefore, in our efforts to understand acculturation and migrant settlement, we need to open our frameworks so that they include sociopolitical perspectives that are sensitive to the way in which oppression both historically and contemporaneously, impact community, identity, and settlement.

### Reflections on Methodology

The work that is reported here shows that different questions can be asked about sense of community and different strategies of data collection and analysis can be used to answer the questions. In this research the SOC was used in two ways. In the first study, the SOC framework was used to explore the experiences and perceptions coloured South African immigrants to Australia had of their communities in South Africa. A qualitative methodology was adopted to address the research question. Qualitative inquiry privileges the experiences and perceptions of the participants and allows for the development of a rich and in-depth understanding of the community from the vantage point of its members. In essence, the qualitative study allowed us to anchor understanding of

sense of community and the migration experiences in the social-cultural-historical realities of the participants. By giving priority to the voices of the participants we were better placed to develop emic understandings of individual and group experiences and gain insight into social and political forces the impact community and individual functioning. In addition, by adopting the qualitative approach for the first study we were able to uncover the different ways in which SOC might be fostered and the implications of oppressive intergroup relations for community.

The second study was informed by the knowledge generated in the first study. In the second study a quantitative research strategy was adopted to explore the nature of SOC and the relationships between SOC and ethnic identification. The instrumentation used in the second phase was adapted to ensure the cultural appropriateness of the measurement of SOC. That is, the SCI was adapted using the information collected in the first study. This is in line with the suggestions of cultural and community psychology researchers who advocate that the research process be sensitive to the realities of the groups we work with and that constructs we assess be grounded in the understandings and realities of the communities with whom we profess to work (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Hughes, et al., 1993; Sinha, 1997). Also, the use of both qualitative and quantitative research strategies has been invaluable because it has allowed us to capture the realities of participants from different perspectives. That is, the multiple methods have allowed for the

development of group specific understandings and experiences of community.

### Future Research

The research that we have conducted to date has shown that the SOC model can be applied to understand migrant adaptation. We have also shown that the framework can be used to guide qualitative inquiry into perceptions and experiences of community and quantitative inquiry into the nature of SOC and its impacts on wellbeing. In our current work we are building on the initial research with South African immigrants (Sonn & Fisher, 1996) by investigating similar questions with different immigrant, refugee, and Indigenous Australian groups in Australia (Colquhoun, 1997; Colquhoun, Drew, O'Connor, & Sonn, 1999; Salmin, 2001). We have extended the focus of the work to identify the impacts of oppression on minority groups, with a particular emphasis on identifying the community resilient ways in which groups adapt to oppression and change (Sonn, & Fisher, 1998; Sonn, Hovane, & Binge, 2001). Through this work we aim to identify the ways in which minority groups adapt social and support systems to provide members with opportunities for positive experiences and to resist oppression.

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