

Sense of Community in Rural Localities of Chiapas

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— Abstract —

The concept of community has a different connotation in multiple disciplinary fields. It can refer to a system of psychosocial relationships, to a group of people with a certain level of interaction, to people sharing a geographical space, or to those who share the use of a language according to certain patterns or cultural habits (Causse, 2009). Considering the community as the fundamental basis of coexistence, the Sense of community, according to the model proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), assumes that such a construct implies the sense of belonging of the people towards their community, the level of influence in collective decision-making, common cultural idiosyncrasy and strong affective ties between those who are part of it. Chiapas, a state in southern Mexico, is distinguished by its socio-cultural and natural resources; however, it also presents high levels of backwardness, inequality, and poverty. This work aims to assess the Sense of Community in five rural towns in Chiapas to assess this construct in contexts of high social vulnerability. To this purpose, the Sense of Community Scale proposed by Sánchez-Vidal (2009) was applied to a non-probabilistic sample of 238 inhabitants of five communities in Chiapas. The results show lower scores for the scale in the town of San Rafael, in the municipality of Ocozocoautla, and in La Florida, municipality of Jiquipilas. The results are discussed within the framework of the sociocultural conditions that prevail in the communities and their demographic configuration.

Keywords:

Community psychology; sense of community; rural communities; psychosocial problems.

The concept of community has a different connotation in the multiple disciplinary fields, that is, it does not have a single definition. In this sense, Causse (2009) points out that a community "can refer to a system of psychosocial relationships, a human grouping, geographical space or the use of language according to certain cultural patterns or habits" (p. 12). In the disciplinary field of psychology, and specifically in community psychology, the concept of community has evolved. Sarason (1974) established a general notion of the concept of community by considering it as a network of relationships of mutual help and collaboration in which a person can develop dependence. On the other hand, Montero (2004) underpinned the idea of community reciprocity by defining it as a dynamic, historical social group that is constituted and developed culturally; in which the members share needs, problems, objectives, and interests; in a specific space and time, and that generate, over time, a collective identity.

More recently, Romero and Muñoz (2014, as cited in Drake-Tapia, 2022) identified several elements that characterize a community. In principle, the authors define a community as "a social group with common relationships and ties that shares certain interests and participates in some common objective or interest" (p. 162), which maintains social interaction in a given context in a sustained manner. The authors point out that, over time, this interaction develops identity that includes the sense of belonging, a feeling of being part of something larger that, gradually, turns the group into a historical-social entity with shared traits, such as customs, traditions, symbols, and lifestyles. In this sense, a community is, in the perspective of Romero and Muñoz (2014), a historical form of social relationship that, from the action linked to the satisfaction of daily needs and problems, produces institutions and values that are established as collective heritage. This work falls within the framework of such references to the concept of community.

The psychological sense of community is a key concept in community psychology (Ramos-Vidal & Maya-Jariego, 2014). Sarason (1974) defined the sense of community as the feeling that a person belongs to a larger community, for which they are assumed to be someone important to them. This refers to a conceptual proximity to the sense of belonging. Subsequently, McMillan and Chavis (1986), to delimit and measure the sense of community, identified four dimensions that, to this day, shape the construct. These four dimensions are belonging, influence, meeting needs, and shared emotional connection. More recently, Esteban-Guitart and Sánchez-Vidal (2012, as cited in Ante & Reyes, 2016), reviewing the concept of sense of community, concluded that the different studies of the construct focus on considering it as a psychosocial experience that is integrated by three dimensions: the territorial dimension, understood as the spatial scale where people develop; the relational dimension, that is, social

interactions; and the symbolic dimension, which includes the elements of social and cultural identity, such as religion.

Regarding the measurement of the sense of community, the proposals of McMillan and Chavis (1986), Chavis et al. (2008), Bishop et al. (1997), Sánchez-Vidal (2001, 2009), and more recently Ante and Reyes (2016). McMillan and Chavis (1986) formulated what is possibly the most used scale to measure the sense of community. This is the Sense of Community Index (SCI), composed of 12 items distributed in four dimensions that correspond to the conceptual arrangement proposed by the authors: satisfaction of needs, influence, belonging, and emotional connection. Later, Chavis et al., (2008) updated the SCI (SCI-II), expanding the scale to 24 items integrated into the same four dimensions of the original instrument.

The Perceived Sense of Community Scale (PSCs), developed by Bishop et al. (1997), measures the sense of community from 30 items that take as reference the conceptual framework of McMillan and Chavis (1986), as well as the authors' own expectations. The PSCs consider three dimensions: mission, which evaluates the perception of what the person is committed to others to achieve common goals; reciprocal responsibility, which refers to the perception that community members are responsible for each other; and disharmony, which represents dissatisfaction with aspects of the community life experience. Sánchez-Vidal (2001; 2009) developed an 18-item scale that, considering the conceptual proposal of Sarason (1974), groups it into four thematic areas: territorial roots, neighborhood interaction, interdependence, or mutuality, and others. In recent years, other proposals have been made to measure the feeling or sense of community. One of them is the one carried out by Ante and Reyes (2016), who designed a scale to measure the sense of community in an urban context, at the neighborhood level, which was made up of 9 reagents grouped into culturally relevant aspects and that consider the components of belonging interrelation, and common culture. In this work, we chose to use the Sánchez-Vidal scale (2009) of 18 items, since it has been applied in similar population contexts, specifically in other localities of Chiapas, Mexico. According to Ante and Reyes (2016), the sense of community is a complex construct, because it has been extremely difficult to define universal elements in its conceptual structure and because, in addition, it must consider specific elements of the culture and context in which it is analyzed or addressed. However, what is less diffuse about the feeling or sense of community is the fact that it is relevant to know and measure it. Knowing the sense of community in highly vulnerable populations, as is the case in this work, becomes relevant in the identification of mutual support networks within communities; information that can be retrieved to outline future intervention strategies aimed at addressing psychosocial problems

such as alcohol consumption, domestic violence, depression, teen suicide, among others; many of which are growing in the study communities.

In this context, the objective of this work is to measure the sense of community in adults living in contexts of high social vulnerability, from five rural localities in Chiapas, Mexico.

METHOD

Study Type

The work is quantitative, descriptive in scope, with a non-experimental, transversal design.

Subjects and context

A non-probabilistic sample was used, for convenience, of 238 inhabitants of five communities in Chiapas, in pre-pandemic times. The percentage distribution was as follows: 39.9% (n= 95) of the participants live in the Gabriel Esquinca community; 24.8% (n= 59) in the town of Gral. Emiliano Zapata; 5.9% (n= 14) in La Florida; 21.4% (n= 51) in Lázaro Cárdenas; and 8% (n= 19) in San Rafael.

The Gabriel Esquinca ejido is part of the municipality of San Fernando, which is 20 km from the state capital, in the economic region III called Mezcalapa. This community was founded in 1938 and currently has a population of close to 2,000 inhabitants. The main economic activities are agriculture, livestock, and trade. The main crops are corn and beans. On the other hand, the community Gral in Emiliano Zapata, founded in 1980, is located in the municipality of Chiapa de Corzo which integrates, along with Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Suchiapa, and Berriozábal, the I Metropolitana economic region. It is a relatively large community, with a current population of around 600 people. It is located 1 km from the El Chorrillo River, which comes from the Grijalva River. Its economic activities are self-consumption fishing and the cultivation of corn and beans. The La Florida ejido is located in the municipality of Jiquipilas, in the II Valle Zoque region of central Chiapas. This community was officially founded in 1995 and currently has a population of close to 100 inhabitants, which has conditioned access to health services since they do not have a health center in the community. As for education, they only have preschool and primary school, both multigrade, so interaction with the neighboring community called Vicente Guerrero is imperative.

Unlike the other communities considered in this study, in Florida, most men go to other neighboring communities to work in field-related tasks,

while women remain at home, taking care of children and attending small businesses (State Committee for Statistical and Geographic Information [CEIEG], 2020).

The communities of Lázaro Cárdenas and San Rafael are located in the municipality of Ocozocoautla de Espinosa, in the same region II Valle Zoque. The ejido Lázaro Cárdenas, which is located approximately 1 km from the ecotourism center El Aguacero, has a population of about 300 inhabitants, who are predominantly engaged in agriculture and livestock. This community was founded in 1975 by indigenous migratory movements, mainly from Zinacantán and San Juan Chamula, who sought to settle on lands with legal certainty that they lacked in their places of origin. In the case of San Rafael, the settlement originated in the nineties, through a land invasion process, which was finally legalized in 1998 through agreements with the state and federal government. Currently, the community has just over 100 inhabitants, who are dedicated to the field and the breeding of backyard animals (CEIEG, 2020).

Chiapas is one of the states with the highest number of inhabitants living in poverty among all the states in Mexico. According to data from the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL, 2022), until 2020, 75.5% of its inhabitants live in poverty and 29% in extreme poverty. According to Villafuerte-Solís (2015), this condition acquires a greater dimension among the peasant and indigenous population of Chiapas, who survive mainly from government social support programs and, in recent years, from the economic remittances sent by relatives of these who have emigrated to the United States.

Among the municipalities in which the communities considered in this study are located, Jiquipilas, Ocozocoautla de Espinosa, and San Fernando are classified as being at a high level of marginalization, while Chiapa de Corzo is at a medium level (Government of Chiapas, 2020). These circumstances place these communities in a condition of high social vulnerability.

Instruments

The Sense of Community Scale, proposed and validated by Sánchez-Vidal (2009), was applied to the Spanish-speaking population. The instrument consists of 18 items in self-report format on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (no agreement) to 9 (strong agreement) that considers the dimensions Interaction (5, 10, 7, 13, 2, 18, and 9), Rooting (6, 1, 16, 3, and 4), and Interdependence (17, 15, and 14). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, the internal consistency metric, reported by the authors is higher than .85, which is sufficient. In a subsequent study by Esteban-Guitart and Sánchez-Vidal (2012) with Indigenous and mestizo youth from San Cristóbal de las

Casas, Chiapas, the authors reported a Cronbach coefficient of .87. In this research, this coefficient has a value of .83, very similar to those reported in those studies.

Procedure

Work teams composed of students from the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of the Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas were organized, who carried out academic internships in each of the communities considered in the study. The scale analyzed in this work was part of a broader instrument that included other variables and scales related to the evaluation of human development. In addition to quantitative data, the fieldwork included the retrieval of qualitative data from interviews with key figures such as community founders, ejido commissioners, or municipal agents; information that was useful exclusively for their description. For the collection of quantitative data, the working groups were trained for this purpose. The application of the instruments was in situ in tours that were made house to house to as many inhabitants as possible, all of them of legal age. The applied instruments were emptied into an SPSS v. 21 for analysis. This procedure was endorsed by the Postgraduate Coordination of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences.

Data analysis

First, the frequency distributions for the sociodemographic variables of the sample were obtained. Secondly, the scores were obtained for each of the communities considered, both generally and by dimensions; this is using the simple average between all the items, as indicated by the author of the scale. In this way, the higher the score obtained on the scale, the greater the feeling of community and vice versa. Subsequently, descriptive statistics were calculated, both for the general scale and by dimensions, reporting mean and standard deviation for each item. Finally, comparisons were made between the means of the five communities using one-factor ANOVA. The normality of the scale scores was performed using Q-Q diagrams, being satisfactory. The results are discussed in the context of where the data comes from.

RESULTS

Of the total number of participants, 56.7% are men and 43.3% are women. The majority, 84.4% reported being married or living in a free union, the rest unmarried or divorced. Regarding religion, 65.9% said they were

Catholic, 8.7% said they were evangelical, and the rest were distributed among other religious beliefs.

Among all the items on the scale, considering the five communities, it stands out that the highest average scores correspond to the items that integrate the interdependence dimension (items 15, 14, and 17), which correspond to the recognition of the importance of establishing collaboration schemes with other people. On the contrary, the items with the lowest average are item 18.- *I can trust others* ($M= 6.11$) and 7.- *One of the best things in life is my neighbors* ($M= 7.05$), both are part of the interaction dimension. However, for these items, the standard deviation is among the highest, which also suggests a high variability between the participants' responses. In general terms, high averages are observed for all items, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1
Community Sense Scale Descriptive Statistics by Item

Num.	Item	M	DE
<i>Interaction</i>			
5	I know and get along well with my neighbors	8.08	1.64
10	My neighbors help me if I need it	7.58	2.33
7	One of the best things in life is my neighbors	7.05	2.33
13	I help my neighbors when they need me	8.29	1.45
2	I have good friends among my neighbors	8.29	1.41
18	I can trust others	6.11	2.73
9	I am satisfied with my relationships with the other people who live here	8.19	1.64
<i>Roots</i>			
6	I am part of the community	8.26	1.76
1	I like this community because it has its own character and traditions	8.11	1.79
16	If I want to, I can influence the life of my community	7.70	1.93
3	My roots are in this place	7.60	2.53
4	I feel the community as my own	7.99	1.92
<i>Interdependencia</i>			
17	It's important to have good relationships with those around me	8.62	1.05
14	I believe that we all need each other	8.66	1.01
15	It is important to help one another	8.78	.70
8	Many things can be done in this community	7.83	1.92
11	I plan to live in this community for a long time	8.42	1.53
12	I see myself as basically the same as everyone else	7.34	2.48

Table 2 shows that, in terms of the overall score, the Lázaro Cárdenas community in the municipality of Ocozocoautla showed the highest average, followed by Gabriel Esquinca in San Fernando and Gral. Emiliano Zapata in Chiapa de Corzo. In Figure 1, it is notable that another community in Ocozocoautla, San Rafael, with the La Florida community, obtained the lowest average scores. However, according to the one-factor ANOVA procedure, it is noted that these differences are not significant, that is, the scores can be considered equivalent.

Table 2
Community Sense Scale Comparison by Community (Lkert 1-9)

	Gabriel Esquinca		Gral. Emiliano Zapata		La Florida		Lázaro Cárdenas		San Rafael		F	p
	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE		
Sense of community	7.96	.99	7.93	.94	7.66	.85	8.12	.75	7.61	1.18	1.399	.235
Interdependence	8.72	.86	8.47	.87	8.86	.25	8.92	.25	8.39	.85	3.467	.009
Interaction	7.67	1.23	7.70	1.20	7.33	1.12	7.74	1.07	7.47	1.67	.449	.773
Roots	8.08	1.31	7.98	1.06	7.34	1.36	8.05	1.20	7.19	1.51	2.900	.023

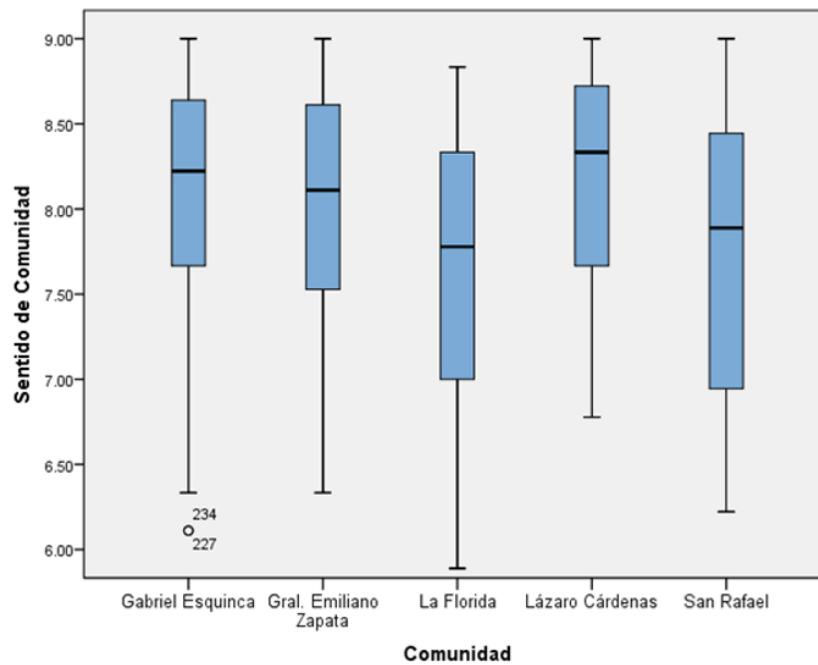


Figure 1. Box Diagram for Sense of Community Scale Overall Scores

When analyzing the scores by dimension, again Lázaro Cárdenas evidenced the highest scores for interaction and interdependence. In this sense, the differences were significant only for the interdependence dimension, not for interaction. On the other hand, the lowest score in interaction corresponded to the San Rafael community. As for Arraigo, significant differences were observed, with the highest scores being obtained by the Gabriel Esquinca community, with a marginal difference over Lázaro Cárdenas. For this dimension, again, the lowest statistically significant scores were obtained by San Rafael.

These results suggest that in the Lázaro Cárdenas community, there is a greater bond between its inhabitants expressed in the recognition of the importance of mutual support, that is, dependence on each other to meet common needs. On the other hand, those who are assumed to have the greatest adaptation and appreciation for their community are the inhabitants of Gabriel Esquinca. These data are relevant when carrying out interventions that require participatory schemes of the premises since greater success is predicted when solidarity schemes of coexistence and a sense of belonging prevail in the communities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The construct *sense of community* refers to a notion about the sense of belonging of the members of a community towards the social construction that life implies within it. In this way, it constitutes an approach to the knowledge of the territory and how it is configured from the perception of the inhabitants.

Rural communities, unlike the urban context, often refer to schemes of collaboration and knowledge of their inhabitants, since customs, traditions, and, on many occasions, history, promote a higher level of empathy and solidarity within the community. However, the conditions of poverty, marginalization, and lack of opportunities could lead to disgust and reproach towards the place where one lives. In this context, the Sense of Community was measured in five rural localities in Chiapas with high social vulnerability, according to the measurement proposal of Sánchez-Vidal (2001; 2009). The results make it clear that the sense of community is a quality that is built collectively within each place, each territory; and, therefore, homogeneous metrics do not fit for its evaluation. Therefore, the interpretation of the results must be assumed with caution.

In general, the scores obtained by all the communities are high (greater than 7.5), which given the context of socioeconomic vulnerability in which the communities of study are located, contrasts with what Vallejo-Martín (2017) proposed, in that the sense of community is influenced by the perception

of social status, being greater when people have a better job and income. This data reveals a different reality in a rural context about urban contexts where a high ethnic heterogeneity is associated with low levels of sense of community and vice versa (Esteban-Guitart & Sánchez-Vidal, 2012). Regarding urban centers, a coincident point is the value placed on trust with neighbors as an expression of interdependence (Ante & Reyes, 2016). However, it differs in the collective participation degree, which refers to interaction mechanisms, being low in urban contexts (Marín et al., 2002). In this case, the inhabitants of these communities come from a common regional context that has facilitated the appropriation of the territory they occupy. Another reading on high scores of sense of community, according to Cueto et al. (2016), maybe in terms of contexts of social vulnerability, which lead the inhabitants of the communities to promote coexistence schemes that allow them to face precariousness and adverse conditions.

Regarding the comparisons made between the communities considered, it is revealed that, in the same municipality (Ocozocoautla), the ejido Lázaro Cárdenas obtained high scores for all the dimensions considered by the instrument used. On the other hand, San Rafael, another community within the same municipal demarcation, recorded the lowest scores among all the communities evaluated. These scores, which are comparable by the similar number of inhabitants residing in these communities, can be explained, among other things, by the history of each place. On the one hand, the origin of Lázaro Cárdenas dates back to 1975 and, since that time, it has changed in terms of infrastructure, services, land regularization, and community organization. In principle, the first settlers came from other parts of the state and found in Lázaro Cárdenas the possibility of establishing themselves with their own land to plant crops and, in this way, support their families. In this regard, it should be noted that a large part of the founding families of this community came from the highlands of Chiapas and shared relevant socio-cultural elements, for example, the original language: Tsotsil. However, as suggested by Delgado (2005), beyond the idiosyncrasies and their shared historical context, the inhabitants of this community have been motivated by their needs and the search to satisfy them.

To this day, the Lázaro Cárdenas ejido is a community that has reached a certain level of social cohesion, families recognize each other, have a defined organization, and, collectively, have sought to take advantage of opportunities offered by its location near both the municipal capital and the Selva El Ocote biosphere reserve. This level of consolidation is evident *in situ* in the landscape that describes the place and explains, in a way, the high scores obtained in this study. In this sense, Vallejo-Martín et al. (2017) point out that social interaction between community organizations and their

members represents a potential source of support for the community, contributing to the development of feelings of belonging.

On the other hand, the history of San Rafael is much more recent, as the first settlers of the ejido settled in the late nineties, in a process of land invasion that, years later, was regularized. The territorialization of lived space, according to Rincón (2021), is a process that is gestated from the thoughts, actions, and experiences of people, united by subjectivity, which produces a meaning and existential sense for places. This process involves time, does not occur spontaneously, and is impossible to induce. However, the community of San Rafael, which from the beginning has had a well-defined organization, is clearly in the process of appropriating its territory, which has been articulated from the management of improvements to the ejido, the regularization of the land and, above all, the search for sources of economic subsistence and political participation. Regarding roots, it is relevant that the locality Gabriel Esquinca of the municipality of San Fernando, the one with the largest population among the communities studied, has obtained the highest scores in this dimension, because the ejido was founded in 1938, which is evident in the community with a higher level of organization that has allowed them to access, over the years, public, educational, and health services. In this sense, mobility processes, such as that experienced by the community of San Rafael in contrast to the community of Gabriel Esquinca, mean a break in space and time (Hoffmann, 2018) and have a great influence on the roots developed by the inhabitants of the communities.

In this context, the sense of community is a variable that has a high subjective load, which is configured from the experience of people and, therefore, constitutes a valuable tool to assess community social processes, social cohesion, interaction, and even as a metric of development. From this work, it can be seen that, despite the limitations inherent to rural communities in Chiapas, the sense of community, roots, and interdependence develop from socio-cultural-historical processes linked to the territory. Therefore, before any intervention initiative in these scenarios, whatever its type or modality, it is desirable to know as much as possible about the historical and cultural context of the community, making the sense of community a good approach to it.

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