

Sense of Community and Citizen Participation in Neighborhood Council in Iran

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Abstract: This paper was explored to understand the effects of sense of community on citizen participation in Neighborhood Councils of Tehran city, Iran. There is a variation in study results regarding citizen participation, therefore understanding the effective factors (e.g. sense of community) can help to make citizen participation efforts successful in neighborhood organization. The analysis of data uses SEM to determine the effects of sense of community on citizen Participation in neighborhood organization. The findings revealed that 66% variance in citizen participation explained by sense of community. The findings of the study imply that residents who have a sense of community with their neighbors are more likely to participate in neighborhood associations.

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1. Introduction

In recent years many efforts taken to promote initiatives to encourage citizen participation, such as creating neighborhood organizations, but some of these initiatives have difficulty eliciting the desired level of resident involvement (Foster-Fishman, Pierce, & Egeren, 2009). In overall based on the Pacione (1988) the most concern in Neighborhood Organization related to the low rates of citizen involvement. However citizens by volunteering in neighborhood organizations can influence on the decisions which made by policy makers, but only few citizens and not every citizen participate in the neighborhood organization (Shakil Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2011). Different researchers worldwide counted the effect of different factors on citizen participation in neighborhood organization, but studies have shown there is a variation in study results regarding citizen participation. Therefore understanding the factors which make citizen participation efforts successful can help to increase the citizen participation in neighborhood organization. This study was designed to discover this mystery and determine the factors that influence on citizen's participation in Neighborhood Council. One of these key factors in participation is Sense of community (SOC). There is consensus among scholars, which sense of community is one of the effective factors to citizen's participation in neighborhood organization. Some scholars generally argued for the reciprocal relationships of sense of community and participation. The result of studies confirms the contribution of participation on increasing the sense of community and decreasing the

feeling of isolation and anonymity within urban context (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Cicognani, et al., 2008; Ohmer, 2007; Wandersman & Florin, 2000). While, some other authors discussed on catalyst role of Sense of Community on social involvement and participation (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2009; Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Cbavis, 1990; Yoo, Suh, & Lee, 2002).

Based on the previous literature and sense of community theory, the main objective of this study is to explore the effects of sense of community as an important factor on citizen's participation in neighborhood councils of Iran. In point view of Aref, Redzuan, & Emby (2009) only few literatures discuss the practical application of approaches that have been successfully used to measure sense of community in different cultural contexts; therefore this paper provides a picture of applying an approach of measuring sense of community in neighborhood councils of Iran. This study attempts to fulfill the practical gap regarding lack of comprehensive studies in Iran on participation in general (Bagherian, Bahaman, Asnarulkhadi, & Shamsuddin, 2009) and citizen participation in particular (Piran, 1999). Also this research is important because up to provide a better understanding of the role of sense of community on the citizen participation in neighborhood council.

2. Literature Review

SahebZadeh & Ahmad (2010) declared the concepts of participation as the main indicator of community development. Hence citizen participation is one of the essential elements for giving power to

people and it is target and strategies of neighborhood association for achieving to the development. According to Aref and Redzuan (2009) without community participation, there are obviously no accountability, no development, and no program. There are several ideas about the participation based on the objective and purpose of programs such as Moser (1984), Kahssay & Oakley(1999), Shaeffer & Sheldon(1994), Pretty(1995), Rifkin & Pridmore(2001), Wilcox (1994), Arnstein(1969, 1971). Typologies of participation are differing between the researchers, while all of them share a common idea concerning the degree of involvement (Asnarulkhadi, 1996). Today, the main target of government to suggest and establish neighborhood councils is to increase citizen participation in community development plans (Musso, Weare, Elliot, Kitsuse, & Shiao, 2007). Thus Sense of community (SOC) is one of the key factors which can influence in promoting citizen participation in neighborhood councils. according to Sarason(1974) the result of higher sense of community is fostering support for community development. After the work of Sarason (1974), McMillan and Chavis's (1986) developed model of sense of community which over the last 30 years remains the primary theoretical reference for most studies (Tartaglia, 2006). McMillan and Chavis (1986) conceptualized four components including membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, shared emotional connection (Table 1).

Membership as a component in sense of community refers to resident believes to be members of their community. Influence is a bidirectional concept McMillan & Chavis (1986) that related to the resident believes on their opportunity to affect other members of community and community and participate to community life. Integration and fulfillment of needs refers to the benefits that people draw from their membership to a community trough extent to which residents' needs were satisfied by the community and their neighbors. Also it is apparent that a sense of togetherness is kind of reward for group members that main the group life. Shared emotional connection explains the residents feeling of link to their community and partly is based on a shared history. The positive relationships between residents and other community members shape the shared history over time (McMillan & Chavis, 1986 (Cicognani, et al., 2008).

Specific operational definitions of SOC will depend on the context in which SOC is measured (Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008). McMillan & Chavis (1986) defined SOC as residents' attitudes and beliefs regarding neighbors and the neighborhood. Bryan, Klein, & Elias (2007) beliefs

SOC is related to interdependent relationships among individuals themselves, and the relationships between individuals and community institutions or associations. According to Peterson, et al., (2008) sense of community defined as a sense of residents' mutual commitment, interdependence, and belongingness with their neighbors. Thus SOC is important from individual and neighborhood aspect (Boyd & Angelique, 2002; Cantillon, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003).

Table 1. Dimensions of sense of community

| sense of community | Elements of sense of community |
|------------------------------|---|
| Membership | Need to belong Shared history Common symbols Family rituals Emotional safety Personal investment Social responsibility Citizenship |
| Influence | rusting relationships Freedom of expression Empowerment Collective well-being |
| Integration | Status Social integration Resilience Shared values Youth subcultures |
| Shared emotional connections | Participation Shared events and narratives |

Source: McMillan & Chavis, (1986) Adopted by Aref, et al. (2009)

Researches on a sense of community determinant and effects in urban environments found it as influencing factor on participation in various community development activities (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Colombo, Mosso, & De Piccoli, 2001; Peterson & Reid, 2003; Speer, 2000; Speer & Peterson, 2000). Empirical researches mainly investigated this concept inside different kind of territorial community, from block to the whole city (Cantillon, et al., 2003). Based on (Wandersman & Florin, 2000) the residents' feeling of connections to their community which is about their sense of community would influence on their participation in local organizations and reduce feelings of isolation. According to Cantillon et al (2003) sense of community produce a shared norms amongst neighbors and connect them together, as a result the neighbors can communally work together for change. Bartkowski (2003) also found that sense of

community is a key factor in motivating people to become active. Yoo et al (2002) studied factors enhancing members' participation in business-to-customer virtual communities. The research results supported the influence of sense of community on participation ($\beta=0.53$). Thus they suggested community managers need to focus on enhancing sense of community to improve participation. When SOC exist residents feel they are important and affective in their community and as a result the community would be important to them as a place for meeting the needs and sharing the values and attached to other community members.

Janowsky (2003) investigated the relationship between participation and sense of community in a primary health care project in the city markets of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. The study hypothesized that women's sense of community significantly related to their participation in urban primary health care project, and found the study results support the hypothesis. The results showed that mothers have a strong sense of community that it is associated with higher level of participation.

Rollero, Tartaglia, Piccoli, & Ceccarini (2009) stated that sense of Community is a belief that bond participation to the perception of individual to the context. They also found sense of community as related to political participation. Liu & Besser (2003) agreed that lack of SOC is one of the reasons why people do not participate in community development. DeNeui (2003) Consistent with Liu & Besser (2003) found a strong direct association between sense of community and community involvement ($\beta = .33$).

Peterson et al (2008) by using the McMillan and Chavis (1986) measure made a new scale (BSCS) of SOC and found overall brief measure of SOC was positively related with community participation ($r = 5.16$, $p>0.01$). Although the relationship of SOC and participation is supported by previous studies (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Perkins, et al., 1990), but there is no agreement on measuring the four components of sense of community (Long & Perkins, 2003; Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002; Tartaglia, 2006).

The present study looked on sense of community with four component including membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, shared emotional connection among neighbors toward neighborhood council.

3. Material and Methods

The study was carried out on 250 citizens in Tehran (capital of Iran). The neighborhood councils of Iran consist of two main committees. The first committee appointed by the city council which is 5 members from city council. The members of second

committee which are working group consist of 10 volunteer residents including seven main members and three utility members, who will be electing by the residents. This study adopted the cross sectional research design in which questionnaire was used as instrument to collect the data and fulfill the adequate number of sample. From different types of probability sampling method, multi stage random sampling procedures chosen. Foster-Fishman, Cantillon, Pierce, & Van Egeren (2007) beliefs focus on participant allowed for better understanding on the unique factors associated with participation levels in the subpopulation. Therefore the population of the current study included all of the men and women and 15 above years who participated in Neighborhood Council activities in 2011.

In point of view Kline(2005) and Schumacker & Lomax(2004) in application of the SEM, to maintain the power of statistical tests and to obtain reliable covariance and correlation estimates, the large sample required. Thus respondents were 250 citizens, where each citizen as respondents was chosen randomly.

Sense of community was measured A Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) developed by Peterson et al (2008) which including 8 items and the Likert-scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5) utilized to measure sense of community. The reason for choosing this scale was that; Peterson et al (2008) claimed that different researcher developed verity of scales to measure sense of community on different type of communities such as Sense of Community Index (SOC), Multidimensional Territorial Sense of Community Scale (MTSOCS), and Community Organization Sense of Community (COSOC) but their reliability were weak (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Long & Perkins, 2003; Obst, et al., 2002). Also they found no study to date has empirically confirmed the 4-factor model of SOC as conceptualized by McMillan and Chavis (1986) (Vieno, Perkins, Smith, & Santinello, 2005) and each study used a unique measure of SOC (Proescholdbell, Roosa, & Nemeroff, 2006). Thus Peterson et al (2008) developed A Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) according to McMillan and Chavis (1986) concept of sense of community. In this view the sense of community consists of four factors of: Needs Fulfillment, Membership, Influence, and Emotional Connection. Then they conduct a factor analysis to confirm the items of each factor. And lastly the confirmed items showed a very good reliability $\alpha=.92$ (Peterson et al; 2008). In this study citizen participation is a composite variable, consisting of three dimensions, namely, Social participation (5 items), environmental participation (7 items), and economic participation (5 items)

according to (Dolisca, Carter, McDaniel, Shannon, & Jolly, 2006).

In current study the questionnaire was piloted with 30 citizens of participants in the Shokoofeh's Neighborhood Council through survey method. The reliability of the questions on the pilot test instrument was measured using the Cronbach alpha ($\alpha = .83$). To determine the instrument validity commonly has been used two different types of validity such as: content and construct validity. Content validity refers to the validity of the content of the research instrument and it have done by face validity reviewed by a panel of experts consist of supervisory committee and passing to other subject matter specialist. Also the validity of the content carried out at the pilot test. Construct validity assessed the strengths of the measurement model. Byrne (2010) suggested two types of construct validity: convergent validity and discriminant validity (Table. 1). The convergent validity of the sense of community in current study was (CR= 0.844) and discriminant validity was (AVE= 0.577).

Table 2. Acceptable Thresholds of Reliability and Construct Validity

| Test | Acceptable Cutoff Value |
|---|--|
| Reliability | ≥ 0.7 |
| Convergent Validity | |
| <i>Factor Loadings</i> | ≥ 0.5 |
| <i>composite reliability(CR)</i> | ≥ 0.7 |
| <i>Average Variance Extracted (AVE)</i> | ≥ 0.5 |
| Discriminant validity | $r < .9$ |
| <i>Correlational Methods</i> | AVE > highest squared correlation with other construct |
| <i>Average Variance Extracted (AVE)</i> | |
| <i>Method</i> | |

Source: Fornell & Larcker (1981), Hair, William, Barry, & Rolph (2006; 2010), Byren (2010)

For assessing the effect of the sense of community on citizen participation the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) 18 was performed. Structural equation modeling is multivariate technique combining aspects of factor analysis and multiple regressions that enables the researcher to simultaneously examine a series of interrelated dependence relationships among the measured variables and latent construct as well as between several latent construct (Hair, et al., 2010).

3. Results

The objective of this study was to test the effect of the sense of community on citizen participation. Therefore the second-order structure of

the BSCS in which four dimensions (i.e., needs fulfillment, group membership, influence, and emotional connection) were hypothesized as representing one underlying SOC construct from Peterson et al (2008).

Table 2 presents fit indices for the CFAs performed in this study. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) were all above .90. More specifically, the root mean square of error approximation (RMSEA) values was within the threshold for acceptable fit and showed a similar pattern with low values indicating that the model provided a good fit to the data from the sample.

Table 3. Overall Fit Statistics for BSCS confirmatory factor analysis

| χ^2 | df | p | χ^2/df |
|------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| 86.993 | 39 | .000 | 2.231 |
| TLI | CFI | GFI | RMSEA |
| .961 | .973 | .940 | .070 |

Furthermore, all of the loadings in Fig. 1 indicate that each of the BSCS items were strong (more than .5). Findings of study showed that sense of community was a significant predictor of citizen participation ($\beta = .81, p < .05$). Residents who have a sense of mutual commitment, belongingness, and interdependence with their neighbors (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) are more likely to participate in neighborhood associations (Perkins et al, 1990). As shown in Figure 1, the paths SOC \rightarrow CP have regression weights (0.000) that are significantly different from zero at the level of $p < 0.05$. This findings are consistent with the past studied that have been concluded by Foster Fishman et al (2009).

Based on the findings of this study it can be concluded that 34% of the variation in citizen participation is unexplained; alternatively, 66% of the variance is accounted for by the predictors in current study. On the other word, this study indicated that those people who had sense of community are more likely to participate in neighborhood council activities.

The findings from this study supported the previews studied in terms of sense of community and citizen participation (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2009; Peterson, et al., 2008; Wandersman & Florin, 2000; Yoo, et al., 2002). Most of these studies and other above mentioned literature evaluated the role of sense of community in participation.

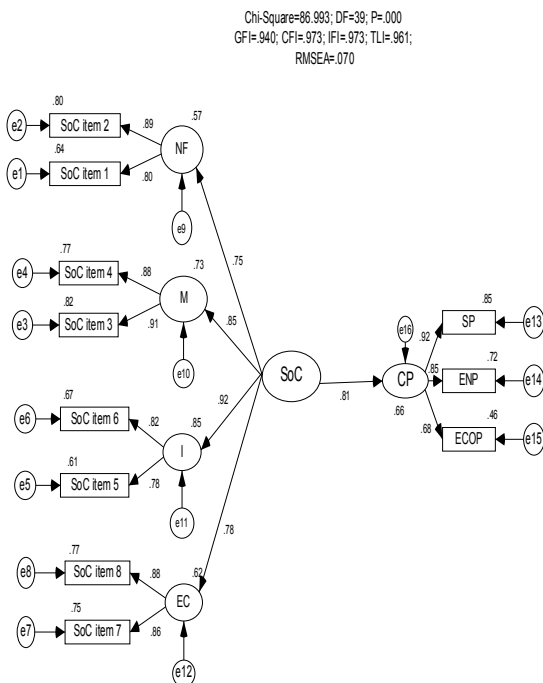


Figure 1. Confirmatory factor analysis of the Sense of Community and citizen participation

4. Discussions

This paper attempt to outline the effects of sense of community in relation to citizen participation in terms of sense of community theory. This theory is useful to understanding about the role of the sense of community on citizen participation. Based on the other researches and from this study, it is found that, sense of community was one of the most important factors on citizen participation which can increase and encourage citizens to participate in neighborhood organization. It can be concluded that, if residents have a sense of mutual commitment, belongingness, and interdependence with their neighbors (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) are more likely to participate in neighborhood associations (Perkins et al, 1990). The result of this study implies to understanding the role of the sense of community as one of the effective factors on citizen participation in neighborhood organization.

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