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**Jolanta Muszyńska**

*Uniwersytet w Białymstoku*

**Karol Konaszewski**

*Uniwersytet w Białymstoku*

### **Individualisation and the sense of community. Case study of the residents of the north-eastern Polish borderland in a pedagogical perspective**

#### **Summary**

The article discusses the sense of community of contemporary residents of the north-eastern Polish borderland. The process of individualisation and the contemporary direction of interpreting the concept of community constitute the background of the analyses. The adopted pedagogical perspective of narration has set out both the theoretical foundations of the presented research results, as well as their interpretation, stressing the importance of the local environment and its cultural nature as factors determining an individual's consciousness of belonging to a community and taking responsibility for it. The article presents selected aspects of the statistical analysis of the sense of community and their interpretation.

**Key words:** individualisation, community, a sense of community, local identity, social dependency

#### **Introduction**

Individualisation, which Ulrich Beck considers as a process characteristic of late modernity and which, according to him, develops in three stages: release, loss and reintegration, directs the stream of thoughts about reconstructing the meaning of communities for contemporary individuals (Beck 2004). A community and its modern interpretation requires moving away from its classical understanding in terms of Ferdinand Tönnies (1988) and instead – searching for

more modern concepts of its interpretation. The features of modern societies and contemporary individuals are an important direction. Thus, variability, traffic, mobility, as rudimentary features of modern societies shall designate the direction for interpreting communities in compliance with the premise of social ties, the Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2010: 204–207) and socialisation (Maffesoli 2008: 33). The sense of community, which, in light of the theory by David MacMillan and David Chavis (MacMillan, Chavis 1986: 315–332) we interpret as an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group that defines the scope of the search for a place and its cultural nature in constructing the local identity of an individual. Identity, as Jock Young (1999: 164) stresses, is a makeshift community, thus the adopted responsibility for it, manifesting itself in the form of community ties, becomes important (Marody, Giza-Poleszczuk 2004: 105). As educators we feel that referring to individuals' subjective experiences connected with their sense of community is justified. We notice the problem in terms of interpreting and "assigning" an individual to a community, which we think is due to including only objective, constitutive characteristics of a community, and not subjective feelings of an individual as to what or who the individual considers a community, what is a community and what is its meaning to the individual.

### **Sense of community – theoretical foundations of the study**

McMillan and Chavis, by using the experience of other researchers, propose their own idea for defining the theory of sense of community (MacMillan, Chavis 1986). The authors, assuming after Joseph R. Gusfield (1975) the definition of the concept of community: in terms of territory and geography (neighbourhood, city, town) and in terms of relation (the quality of interpersonal relationships) as complementary categories, propose four criteria of such definition and theory of the sense of community.

The first of the included measures is "membership". Membership, being a member of a particular group, is interpreted by the authors as a subjective need of anyone, not only the belief and expectation that the group accepts me, but also the willingness to devote to the group. Membership, affiliation with a group, also appoints the group's limits. The boundaries of a group are necessary for two reasons. Firstly, they clearly indicate who belongs to it and secondly (which is the result of the first reason) they grant the individual a sense

of emotional security. The individual, but also the group, shall designate its borders. In case of the group, these are often cultural boundaries, which use language, values and the rituals of everyday life as clear criteria for belonging to the group, but also of its limits. A common set of symbols, the meaning of things and values attributed by those who use them is, per the authors' understanding, the first step towards creating a community.

The second dimension of community itself and the sense of community is "influence", interpreted both ways, as the influence the individual has on the group, thus stressing his relationship in the functioning of a group and the influence the group has on the individual, with an indication of the socialisation processes, adaptation, culturalisation or aculturation. The reciprocity of influences of the two participants, actors (individual and the group) of the aforementioned social relation allows for the development of specific standards of the functioning of the group, vital to its tenacity. The third dimension, as proposed by McMillan and Chavis, is comprised of integration and the fulfilment of needs, which they consider the motivation for individuals' behaviour, stating that people are doing what serves their needs. The sense of membership in a group of people who share their views and values, have similar needs, priorities and objectives strengthens their beliefs that together they are better able to fulfil those needs. The last dimension of the sense of community, which the authors consider, is about an individual's shared emotional connection with a group, manifesting itself in sharing common experiences. Sharing common experiences is partly based on common history, family biography or the history of the place. However, McMillan and Chavis do not deem it necessary that members have completely participated in a history, but they must identify with it. At the same time they indicate that complicity in historical events has an impact on strengthening social bonds.

McMillan and Chavis's theory of the sense of community is based on the assumption that all dimensions of community are interdependent on each other and their internal dynamics decides about the existence of a sense of community and its permanence. McMillan and Chavis's theory of the sense of community has been subject to criticism by Brand Nowell and Nail Boyd, who accused them of constructing the theory of the sense of community on the foundations of the theory of need, which excludes responsibility within the sense of community (Nowell, Boyd 2010: 828–841). Responsibility in the context of the present time is one of the most important issues. As Hans Jonas (1996) stresses, the changing nature of modern people leads to crossing the boundary of the existing ethical

reflection and thus leads to an ethical vacuum. As a consequence, what emerges is the domination in ethics based on heuristics of fear rather than taking responsibility. Responsibility, according to H. Jonas, can be interpreted as a natural and contract responsibility. Natural responsibility in his approach is close to moral responsibility. While the contractual responsibility is the result of joint action and is of normative nature (Jonas 1996: 56–57). As far as moral responsibility is associated with one's worldview and refers to the realm of moral values, contractual responsibility does not have to be in line with one's outlook, sometimes it can even be contradictory.

The sense of community is associated with accepting the responsibility for both the shape and permanence of the community. Responsibility stems from the importance of the place for an individual, thus it manifests itself in one's local identity. The manifestation of the feeling of responsibility is an individual's sense of social interdependence, which is exemplified by actions of complementary nature (Marody, Giza-Poleszczuk 2004: 140–145).

Complementarity means that the individual joins the community, which he is a part of and their actions are driven in a common direction – the permanence of the community. This type of bond assumes breaks the rules of individual freedom and equality but at the same time creates the strongest type of social links – community ties. The community in this context, first of all, means the sense of unity (but it is not the result of sameness). Secondly, it assumes the interdependence of each of its members based on complementarity (complementing each other's actions) in relation to the activities of the community, and the result is the maintenance of its existence. Bonds produced by the community are characterised by a specific form of interdependence units and their activities conditioned are always relative to the parent task and result from habitat (habit), thus they are not reflective activities. The complementarity of activities is accompanied by the community of preferences, compassion and the community of “knowledge”, kept only in the memory of common life. Communities based on bonds are created by the “natural will”, which gives us the right to create social links, in which the individual is bound with a sense of membership, but is also bound by the feelings of fidelity, gratitude and loyalty. Therefore, it changes individual emotions into moral emotions, which leads to one's commitments to the group as a natural thing that does not require second thoughts or reflections.

Sense of community is an individual's awareness of their relationship with a specific group of people and with all of the socio-cultural attributes which characterise it. One trait which we consider important and which we believe to

largely determine the socio-cultural image of a given human community is the cultural landscape of the place in which such group functions, and its social criterion of significance are the cultural values held by the group that determine the mutual relations between its members.

We understand sense of community as a category which binds (joins) together an individual's identification with a place and with its socio-cultural nature manifesting itself in the local identity, and the complementarity of the social behaviour of individuals, expressed in their actions, which constitute an indicator of the communal (social) ties.

### **Research method**

The empirical data has been collected using an original research tool – a questionnaire entitled “Me and my local community”. The proper (quantitative) study began in January 2013 and lasted until June 2013. The questionnaire consisted of 114 statements. The respondents rated the statements using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 meant that the statement definitely did not describe them and 5 that it definitely described them. The tool was designed, according to the theoretical assumptions, to measure the following variables: four dimensions of the sense of community (membership, impact, integration and satisfaction, emotional connection with place) and the type of social interdependence (complementarity, exchange, similarity). 49 items related to: identification with the place, valorisation of cultural values, emotional attachment to the place. On this basis, the local identity (LI) of the respondents was determined in the individual sphere. 20 statements related to the types of social interdependence and social behaviour towards the reference group of the respondents. Those allowed to indicate the type of social interdependence typical for the respondents: complementarity (CSI); exchange (ESI); similarity (SSI). Occurrence of local identity (LI) and complementarity (CSI) were the determinants of the overall sense of community (SoC). Due to the nature of the researched area, the questionnaire also contained a number of statements (20) about the presence of culturally different people (in the local space (openness versus closedness). Another set of statements dealt with independent variables: family origin (indigenous, non-indigenous); ethnic and religious homogeneity or heterogeneity of families of the respondents. The last group of questions was made up of statements about social activity of respondents and activities

undertaken in a particular local community, as well as socio-demographic situation of the respondents and their families.

In the context of the theoretical assumptions about the sense of community (dimensions of the sense of community and the type of social interdependence – general LI score and CSI score), the results of our research confirm that a developed sense of community is more likely among people who agree that: everyone is obliged to work for all members of the local community; knowing who the members of local government are is important to them; what determines the bonds with a place are the values and cultural traditions of the reference group.

### **Study group**

The research was conducted among the inhabitants of the North-Eastern Polish borderland. In this study I have used a purposeful selection. The purposefulness of the selection stemmed from accepting the assumption about the importance of human capital (Schultz 1961) and social capital in the widely-understood development of the local community. Thus, the subject were recruited among part-time students majoring in teaching in public and private universities operating in the Podlaskie voivodship. In total, 292 residents were examined. The most representative group of respondents were persons in the age group 19–25 years (62.8%) and 26–35 years (27%). The other two age categories (36–45 years old) and (46 and more years old) accounted for a total of about 10% respondents. The biggest group consisted of residents of cities above 50 thousand citizens (37.6%) and cities between 10 and 50 thousand citizens (20.6%). The smallest percentage of respondents live in cities of less than 10 thousand (12.2%). Rural areas have a strong representation (in total 29.6%), including 14.3% in villages, which seat the municipality, and 15.3% in villages which do not seat the municipality.

### **Statistical analysis of data**

The following software was used in compiling the collected quantitative data – Microsoft Office Excel 2007, whereas in performing statistical analysis – SPSS 18.0 suite. Rho Spearman correlation and logistic regression were used.

Analysis of the correlations will allow for pointing out the directly proportional (for the values  $> 0$ ) or inversely proportional (for the values  $< 0$ ) dependency between the variables. The strength of the relations will be interpreted according to the following key:  $R > 0.5$  as strong correlation,  $R$  mark between 0.3 and 0.5 as moderate correlation,  $R$  between 0.2 and 0.3 as weak correlation, and  $R < 0.2$  as no or negligible correlation. Predictors of sense of community were determined on the basis of logistic regression analysis. A variable that explains at least 5% of the total variance of the dependent variable was considered a predictor. Thus we obtain results regarding the importance of sense of community.

## Results

Table 1 presents the relationship between the occurrence of the sense of community and selected factors controlled during exploration and extracted in research assumptions.

Table 1. Correlation between the sense of community and analysed factors

Analysed factors, in which case the Rho Spearman's correlation coefficient was found $\geq 0.20$	Correlation coefficient	Significance (bilateral)
Bond with the village due to the values and traditions of the test reference group	0.37(**)	.000
Making community through shared values and cultural traditions of the reference group	0.31(**)	.000
Cultural tradition as the largest value of the local community	0.31(**)	.000
Living among those who appreciate the same values as a condition of being at home	0.30(**)	.000
A sense of connection with the town because of the childhood spent there	0.31(**)	.000
Recognition among friends and acquaintances as an important ant category in the collective identity (WE)	0.20(**)	.000
Recognising persons of the same religion as an important category in the collective identity (WE)	0.29(**)	.000
Recognising colleagues from work and university as an important activity (WE)	0.27(**)	.000

Recognising colleagues from the organisation as an important category in the collective identity (WE)	<b>0.34(**)</b>	.000
Recognising neighbours as an important category in the collective identity (WE)	<b>0.39(**)</b>	.000
Recognising other townfolk as an important category of collective identity (WE)	<b>0.32(**)</b>	.000
Recognising the residents of the region as an important category of collective identity (WE)	0.30(**)	.000
Working in the local-self government	<b>-0.29(**)</b>	.000
Belonging to the local aid organisations	<b>-0.25(**)</b>	.000
Choosing the same town as a place to live	0.25(**)	.000
Choosing a different town as a place to live	<b>-0.26(**)</b>	.000
Material and family situation as a condition of remaining in the same town	<b>0.34(**)</b>	.000
Material and family situation as a condition of remaining in the same voivodship	0.30(**)	.000
A special relationship with the place of current residence	<b>0.32(**)</b>	.000

\*\* correlation is significant at the 0.01 level both ways

The most important factors related to the occurrence of the sense of community are: a bond with the town because of the values and traditions of the test focus group; recognition of friends from an organisation as an important category in collective identity (WE); recognising the neighbour as an important category in the collective identity (WE); recognising townfolk as an important category in the collective identity (WE); material and family situation as a condition of remaining in the same town; a special relationship with the place of current residence. These variables have a statistically strong correlation. Three variables were not very strong, but statistically significant negative correlations. Therefore, the likelihood of the occurrence of a sense of community is decreased when subjects are asked for a job in local government, membership to the local relief organisations and a selection of the same town. The strongest correlation was obtained in relation to the variable “recognising neighbours as an important category in the collective identity (WE)”.

Correlation analysis allowed the identification of a number of variables, and showing the partial dependencies between them and the occurrence of

the sense of community. I think that it is important to identify a comprehensive group of variables, with reciprocal links and aft on the possibility of a sense of community.

Table 2. Logistic regression for the variable "sense of community". Model summary

-2 LG reliability	R square of Cox and Snell	R square of Nagelkerke
243,745(a)	0.415	0.554

(a) The estimate has been completed on the iteration number 7 because estimates of the parameters changed by less than 0.001

Table 3. Logistic regression for the variable "sense of community". Variables in the model

Variables	B	Standard error	Wald	df	Significance	Exp(B)
The importance of knowledge who are the members of the local government	1.290	0.206	39.042	1	0.000	3.634
Commitment to act for the benefit of all	1.111	0.193	33.131	1	0.000	3.037
Bond with the village due to the values and traditions of the reference group	0.802	0.135	35.191	1	0.000	2.229
Constant	-10.734	1.292	69.012	1	0.000	0.000

Source: own research

Variables posted in table 3 independently create a model in the hierarchy of the quotient field  $\text{Exp}(B)$  which means the ratio of probability that a sense of community will occur to the probability that it will not. The variability of the sense of community is primarily decided by the knowledge of who is a member of the local self-government. This increases the chance of the occurrence of the sense of community ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 3.634$ ). Another thing of importance is the commitment to act for the benefit of all residents ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 3.037$ ). The last variable included in the model relates to ties with the town due to the values and cultural traditions of the reference group ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.229$ ). The model explains 55.4% of the variance in the sense of community among the respondents.

## Discussion

Similar relationships were noted by Robert Doolittle and Donald MacDonald who explored attitudes and communication behaviours at the neighbourhood level of social organisation. Their research aimed to determine the level of difference in the sense of community manifested in residents of different neighbourhoods in relation to five criteria they adopted: informal interactions (with neighbours); safety (good place to live); pro-urbanity (privacy, anonymity); neighbour preferences (frequency of interactions with neighbours), and localness (involvement in the affairs of the neighbourhood). Their results allowed them to formulate three important conclusions. They found that there was an inverse relationship between pro-urbanism of residents and their preferences regarding neighbours, that there was a direct correlation between feeling safe and neighbourhood preferences. They also discovered that in a situation of decreasing pro-urban attitudes the sense of safety increased (Doolittle, MacDonald 1978).

Similar conclusions emerge from research by Thomas J. Glynn. The main purpose of his research was to determine differences in the sense of community among residents of the Israeli Kfar Blum kibbutz and residents of two communities in Maryland. The research clearly indicated a higher real level of the sense of community among the residents of the kibbutz than among the residents of the Maryland community. The strongest predictors of the sense of community were: length of residence, satisfaction with the place of residence, and the number of neighbours with whom the respondents were on a first-name basis (Glynn 1986).

From the point of view of our research results, the results obtained by Stephanie Riger and Paul J. Lavrakas (1981) and Roger S. Ahlbrandt and James V. Cunningham (1979) are interesting. Riger and Lavrakas (1981) identified four characteristic groups of local community members, where the age of respondents was a significant variable. Those were: young mobiles characterised by low attachment and low rootedness; young participants with high attachment to the place and low rootedness; isolates, with low attachment and high rootedness, and established participants with high attachment and high rootedness. Ahlbrandt and Cunningham (1979), on the other hand, concluded that the sense of community determines a commitment to community affairs and a high level of satisfaction with this engagement. It turned out that the respondents most engaged in the affairs of their communities and showing satisfaction with this

work belonged to small local communities, so they were more loyal to their neighbours and more willing to take action on their behalf.

## Conclusions

This present study, the subject of which has been the sense of community of the members of the local communities of Poland's north-eastern borderlands, has been conducted in a socially and culturally unique area. The multicultural nature of the region, shaped by its history, and the modern cultural and religious diversity of the area, as well as its peripheral location have influenced the study results. In the analyses, we have noticed a number of variables conditioning the sense of community. The differences in the sense of community were primarily determined by the knowledge of the members of the local government. Such knowledge increased the probability of having a sense of community. Recognising the obligation to act for all residents was also important. The last variable related to the connection to the locality because of the values and cultural traditions of the reference group. The model explained 55.4% of variance in the sense of community of respondents. Thus, the presence of a sense of community increases in people who think that everyone is obliged to act for the benefit of all members of the local community, that it is important to know who the members of the local government are, and the cultural values and traditions of the reference group determine the relationship with the local community.

The hybrid nature of the social world and its heterogeneity orders to search for categories capable of showing the characteristics of social reality, in which movement and flow are the norm. The control mechanisms of social life are associated with a particular role of culture, which explains and shapes the social order and social dynamics. Today, the cultural construction of a locale often replaces that notion of a place in a topographical sense. Therefore, locality comes across as a structure of feeling, some phenomenological placing of the local community (Appadurai 2005: 181).

Contemporaneity and its "cultural situation" understood as the increasing diversity of cultural space a constant expansion of its area originating from the domination of the media, provokes an individual to search for such a place, where the world can be concentrated to the form of a point on a map, regarded as "home". This need has been highlighted in our current analysis.

Social space is not a ready construction but is constantly in the process of creating a structure of relationships and interactions. The matching of people to visualised places in which they form relationships and give these places their own, new quality – process of “spacing” (Surzykiewicz 2010: 207). This process is a part of the foundation of such a course of educational influences in the local area in order for the space constructed there to carry the elements of a community and create a sense of community. Reflectiveness as a feature of modern consciousness forces these individuals to perceive other values in everyday life.

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