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Architecture Program

2014

Community Satisfaction

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Synonyms: Community quality of life

Definition

Community has been described as an original phenomenon, namely, the local unity of a group of human beings who live their social, economic, and cultural lives together and jointly recognize and accept certain obligations and hold certain standards of value in common. Satisfaction can be defined as the discrepancy between aspiration and achievement, ranging from the perception of fulfillment to that of deprivation. Satisfaction is highly personal, heavily influenced by past experiences and current expectations. Finally, we can say that the term community satisfaction refers to people's subjective evaluation of their own well-being as measured by how well their local community meets their personal needs.

Description

Simply stated, community satisfaction refers to people's subjective evaluation of their well-being as measured by how well their community meets their needs (Matarrita-Cascante, 2009). To better understand community satisfaction, the initial task is to define the underlying components. Three interrelated ideas will be explored: (1) community, (2) satisfaction, and (3) community satisfaction. Then a discussion of what researchers have learned and a conclusion follows.

What Is Meant by Community?

Social scientists have come to use the term community in a variety of ways (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Contemporary notions of community revolve around the concepts of community of place and community of interest (Heller, 1989). The first is defined by geography or physical territory and the second by personal relationships (Cochrun, 1994). Rigby and Vreugdenhil (1987) suggest that essential to the concept of community is a group of people sharing a sense of place and living within a defined geographical area, whereas Peterson, Speer, and McMillan (2008) emphasize that community is composed of people in communication who have common interests, ties, or shared emotional connection. Thus, Konig (1968) was quite right when he suggested that community is an original phenomenon, namely, the local unity of a group of human beings who live their social, economic, and cultural lives together and jointly recognize and accept certain obligations and hold certain standards of value in common.

What Is Meant by Satisfaction?

Satisfaction is defined by the Oxford Dictionary (Oxford University, 2011) as fulfillment of one's wishes, expectations, or needs, or the pleasure derived from this. Expanding on this definition, Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) and Campbell (1981) believe that satisfaction can be viewed as an act of judgment, a comparison between aspiration and achievement, ranging from the perception of fulfillment to that of deprivation. They additionally feel that satisfaction is highly personal, heavily influenced by past experiences and current expectations. Theoretically, the most probable cause of reported satisfaction or dissatisfaction is the extent to which unfilled needs exist (Morris & Winter, 1978). Relating the idea of satisfaction to the environment, Rigby and Vreugdenhil (1987) equate the term satisfaction with well-being and livability. In conclusion, Rojek, Clemente, and Summers (1975) suggest that satisfaction with a particular environment is dependent on two key assessments: (1) the manner in which the attributes are perceived and (2) the standard of reference against which the attribute is measured.

What Is Meant by Community Satisfaction?

The following provides a historical overview of the concept of community satisfaction. Vernon Davies (1945) was one of the first to approach community satisfaction as a topic of sociological research by developing a schema of 42 positive and negative values that were measured using Likert scales. Davies' model of community satisfaction was an operationalized construct, resulting in a single score. Much of the subsequent research followed Davies method, focusing on the determinants of community satisfaction with little attention to the nature of community satisfaction. This method of inquiry poses two problems: (1) the terms community and satisfaction may mean any number of things to the residents (Deseran, 1978) and (2) many indicators may measure the same thing, exaggerating the overall importance of the factors (Brown, 2003b).

In the 1960s, researchers began to express concern about the prior multi-item methods used in the exploration of community satisfaction. Researchers began using a smaller number of items to measure community satisfaction (Gulick, Bowerman, & Back, 1962; Hollingshead & Rogler, 1963). This approach minimized the problem of overweighting of

similar items, but it still left the researcher unsure of what the respondents were thinking when asked how satisfied they were with their community. The lack of precision led researchers to the understanding that any research on community satisfaction is ultimately subjective. Marans and Rodgers (1975) clearly capture this new understanding in summarizing their findings: "we can see that the objective characteristics of a person's situation cannot be equated with how he feels about the situation" (p. 303). They further argue that satisfaction is dependent both upon the objective circumstances in which individuals find themselves as well as the sets of values, attitudes, and expectations they bring into the situation. Both Marans and Rodgers (1975) and Campbell et al. (1976) proposed models of environmental satisfaction where community satisfaction was one domain among many affecting persons in their daily life (a point reinforced by Campbell, 1981). The models show how objective environmental attributes lead to perceptions of environmental attributes, then to assessments of environmental attributes, and, eventually, to satisfaction levels. These models were instrumental in providing direction to subsequent research. In addition, the use of more sophisticated statistical analysis techniques made it easier to handle multiple measures of satisfaction.

Drawing from the work of Erving Goffman (1974), Deseran (1978) provided a new perspective on community satisfaction. He argued that people define the situation in which they find themselves and act accordingly. In his view, individuals experience community as an objective reality; at the same time, they are subjectively creating it, i.e., it is an emergent, multidimensional phenomenon, which is a function of opportunities and access present in their community. To say it is emergent means that community satisfaction cannot be objectively measured across all communities, places, and times. It emerges from the social interaction of people in a particular place and time, so emergent outcomes are not entirely predictable, but some patterns can be identified, because people typically act within known and accepted social rules and norms (Brown, 2003b). Thus, by the 1980s, it was well accepted by researchers that community satisfaction dealt more with residents' subjective interpretations of their objective conditions than with the objective conditions per se. The advent of geographic information systems (GIS) has contributed to our understanding of the relationship and impact of the characteristics of the environment and people's assessment of their life satisfaction by allowing the integration of subjective survey-driven individual assessment with the objective characteristics (physical, demographic, and socioeconomic) of the surrounding physical environment (Marans & Stimson, 2011), as well as the effect of the size of environment (community) (Kweon & Marans, 2011). To summarize, Heaton, Fredrickson, Fuguitt, and Zuiches (1979) suggest that measuring community satisfaction may be understood as tridimensional, composed of (1) factual knowledge to provide the descriptive content (2) evaluative direction to suggest personal appraisal of a situation, and (3) salience to indicate the relevance of a circumstance to the actor. However, Chipuer and Pretty (1999) warn "against making assumptions about similarities between geographical and relational communities because of different cultural and geographic influences on the notion of community" (p. 645). Hillier (2002) suggests that the two types of communities, of place and of interest, rarely overlap today. The circumstances of the past when the two coexisted are not as common today. Thus, for many people, the important community may be the community of interest.

What Have Researchers Learned About Community Satisfaction?

The research has continually documented that persons, including many who live in what might be called inferior environments, tend to be fairly satisfied with their communities (Campbell et al., 1976; Gulick et al., 1962; Hollingshead & Rogler, 1963) this has been attributed to subjective well-being homeostasis (reversal towards the mean) by Cummins, Lau, and Davern (2012). Further, the proportion of residents in rural areas who are satisfied with their community tends to be higher than among urban dwellers (Campbell, 1981; Marans & Rodgers, 1975; Theodori, 2001). Factors found to be related to community satisfaction include age (Campbell et al., 1976; Filkins, Allen, & Cordes, 2000; Goudy, 1977; Marans & Rodgers, 1975; Rojek et al., 1975) density (Baldassare, 1986) duration of residence (Brown, 1993; Campbell et al., 1976; Marans & Rodgers, 1975; Miller & Crader, 1979; Rojek et al., 1975) education (Bradburn, 1969; Campbell et al., 1976; Filkins et al., 2000; Marans & Rodgers, 1975; Miller & Crader, 1979) family size (Miller & Crader, 1979) gender (Filkins et al., 2000); income and occupational status (Bradburn, 1969) migration attitudes (Schulze et al., 1963); migrant status (Stinner & Toney, 1980) proportion of friends living in the community, proportion of adults known in the community, and organizational membership (Goudy, 1977) satisfaction with employment (Brown, 2003a; Filkins et al., 2000); social participation, residential mobility, and residential satisfaction (Fried, 1984) social/ spiritual satisfaction (Filkins et al., 2000) socioeconomic status in the community (Fried, 1984) and individual experience with family (Toth, Brown, & Xu, 2002).

Conclusion

Overall the researchers have produced mixed findings about the relative importance of these factors as predictors of community satisfaction. For example, Zehner and Chapin's (1974) study of Washington, D.C., area communities found that service ratings only accounted for 18% of the variance in community satisfaction, and in a nationwide study by Campbell et al. (1976), no more than 19% of the variance in community satisfaction was explained by nine service attributes. Even after including personal characteristics of respondents, the explained variance was no more than 21%. Thus, without the inclusion of respondents' evaluations of the variables that are of greatest salience to their reported satisfaction levels, few studies will explain greater portions of variance than those reported by Goudy (1977) in his examination of community satisfaction, i.e., 40 %. In other words, community satisfaction is a concept of such breadth and depth that it encompasses evaluations of social variables and local services but is not fully accounted for by these items. Early on, Fried (1984) concluded that "community satisfaction is neither a global overarching orientation nor a simple summation of individually varying concrete experiences. Rather, it is a coherent but differentiated set of community orientations, each based on several interrelated and possibly mutually compensatory community experiences" (p. 68). He identified four distinct factors of local community satisfaction: (1) residential satisfaction (housing and neighborhood), (2) convenience satisfaction (availability of local resources), (3) interpersonal satisfaction (neighborhood interaction, friends), and (4) political satisfaction (delivery of services). Further, although there are similarities across different socioeconomic groups, they may differ in the importance of the factors.

There are various concepts that have been related to community satisfaction in the literature—neighborhood and community attachment, community identity, social capital, and life satisfaction. Throughout the literature on community identity, there is an essential division between territorial/locality-based conceptions of community and those concerned with social/network relationships (Puddifoot, 1995). Community and neighborhood attachment can be viewed as multidimensional concepts composed of attitudes, neighboring, and problem-solving within a particular geographical location (Brown, 2003a). Social capital is a concept which refers to connections within and between social networks (Putnam, 2000). Finally, Sirgy and Cornwell (2002) suggest that satisfaction with the social features of neighborhoods seems to affect life satisfaction through community satisfaction. Specifically, satisfaction with the neighborhood social features (such as social interactions with neighbors, people living in the neighborhood, ties with people in the community, crime in the community, race relations in the community, outdoor play space, and sense of privacy at home) contributes significantly to one's overall feelings about the community (community satisfaction).

Cross-References: American Demographics Index of Well-Being, Community Satisfaction, Life Quality Index, Quality of Community Life Measures, Quality of Life, Quality of Life Index

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