



## Sense of Community: Let's Build it Together!

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Immigration policy is debated around the globe. Xenophobia abounds. Yet, one of every 30 people live outside of their country of birth. Immigrants and longer-term residents often transform their *sense of community*—their feelings of belonging and mattering to the community, and beliefs that they will meet their needs through the community—in the new communities they share together. If we understand how these diverse community members develop their

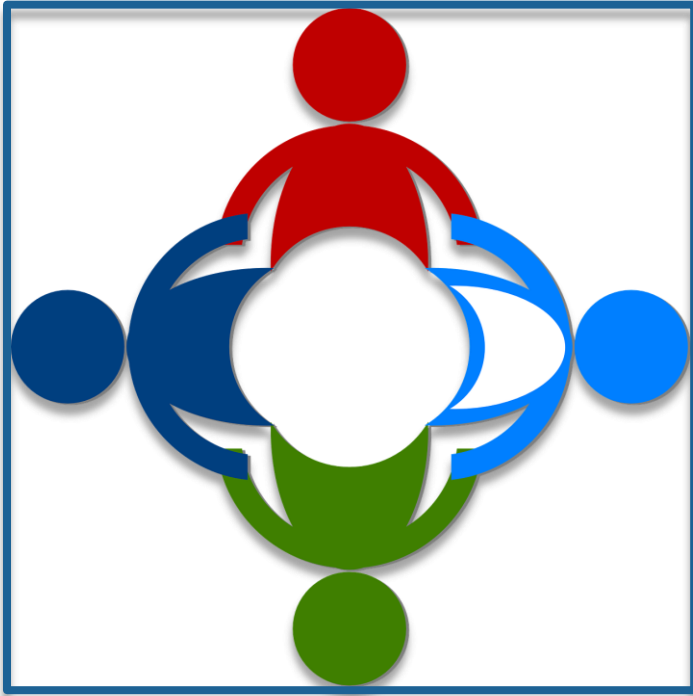


Figure 1. CCo

and community participation. Therefore, we wanted to understand how newer and more established community members develop this shared feeling of belonging. So, we studied *sense of community* among immigrants, children of immigrants, and others who had lived in the country for three or more generations. Their communities could be “relational” (like families, schools, clubs, religious communities, and ethnic groups) or “territorial” (like neighborhoods, towns, states, or countries). We also explored how these diverse community members formed and transformed their *sense of community* in these shared communities. We wanted to see if the communities, and the ways in which people formed their *sense of community*, differed by people and by setting.

**Instead of differences, we found countless similarities!**

### Highlights

**Small “relational” communities (like families, schools, clubs, religious communities, and ethnic groups) are particularly important for developing positive *sense of community*.**

**Systems that limit membership and power can obstruct *sense of community*.**

"While heated immigration rhetoric reverberates globally, impacts of immigration are felt locally by immigrants and members of their receiving communities. Our study sought to examine how these members formed sense of community in shared communities. Although we probed for differences, we found copious similarities among participants—often irrespective of immigration status, nationality, age, gender, race, ethnicity, or context—in the communities to which they belonged and the ways in which they experienced and created sense of community."

## **Methods**

We interviewed 201 first- and second-generation immigrants and third generation or more “receiving” community members in the Baltimore-Washington corridor of the U.S., and in two Italian cities: Torino and Lecce.

Immigrant community members in the U.S. were from (or their parents were from) Latin America, whereas immigrant community members in Italy were from (or their parents were from) Morocco (in Torino) and Albania (in Lecce). We then analyzed these interviews to find similarities and differences.

## **Results**

- Immigrant and receiving community members construct *sense of community* with one another in similar ways.
- Small “relational” communities (like families, schools, clubs, and religious communities) are particularly important for developing positive *sense of community*.
- Members can belong to a community based on one shared characteristic while diverging on other characteristics. For example, a receiving community member could be a member of a church with immigrant community members. These individuals share religion while diverging on immigration status. In this way, all community members can bring diversity to their shared communities.
- However, systems that limit membership and power can obstruct belonging to the “territorial” communities where people live, like cities, states, and countries. For example, not being able to vote or access living wage jobs due to immigration status limited some members’ *sense of community*.

## **HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES, RESULTS, AND IMPLICATIONS?**

A community psychology perspective helped us to move beyond a narrow focus on individuals’ internal processes to the many contextual factors that influence people’s experiences in their settings. And so, community psychology helped us to illuminate how diverse people form and transform shared communities. This broader lens also helped us pay attention to structural issues that define who has power and privilege and who can “belong” in communities that remain segregated along racial, economic, and other social lines. Because of this lens, the implications of our findings go beyond individual intervention to systems-level recommendations.

## What Does This Mean For?

**Practice**—We should create, invest in, and support diverse communities in which immigrants and receiving community members have specific opportunities to interact, such as public schools, workplaces, and organizations.

**Social Action**—We must confront structural challenges rooted in power through policy change at local and federal levels to support sense of community in diverse communities.

**Similar settings**—We should keep in mind that we likely share at least one interest, value, experience, or other characteristic around which we can form community with people who seem different from us. We should bring attention to these shared characteristics to support the development of community while leaving room for us to be different from one another on other characteristics, like our immigration status.

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