

*AVAILABILITY OF SIMILAR OTHERS, FREQUENCY OF SOCIAL
INTERACTION AND COMMUNITY SATISFACTION*

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ABSTRACT

Enhancing the quality of community life has become an increasingly important consideration in the area of community development. The relationship between the social life of residents and satisfaction with the community, however, has been the subject of much debate because of the multifaceted nature of social interactions. This paper, using path analytic techniques, examines the influence of the perceived availability of similar others and the frequency of social interactions on women's satisfaction with the community. It is hypothesized that perceived availability of similar others has a stronger relationship to community satisfaction than does frequency of interactions. The hypothesis is supported. The results also indicate that the availability of similar others specifies the relationship of the family life cycle to community satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing the quality of community life, with regard to promoting community satisfaction through the social experiences of residents, has become an increasingly important consideration in the area of community development. It has precipitated interest in both public and private sectors. Communities face the challenge of providing a rewarding social life for their residents if they are to be viable, successful environments. Bringing this goal to fruition, however, is not an easy task. Although there has been growing literature on the "ingredients" that lead to residents' satisfaction with the community, the salient social features that contribute to successful communities are not clear-cut.

Residents' satisfaction with the community has been linked in a positive direction to such items as home ownership, appropriate size of dwelling units and amount of space available. It has also been negatively associated with lack of privacy (Michelson, 1977; Norcross, 1973; Lansing, Marans, and Zehner, 1970). The location of the community and accessibility of facilities also affect residents' satisfaction (Norcross, 1973).

There are some apparent contradictions in the literature. Speare (1974) and Morrison (1967) assert that longer durations of residence cause satisfaction. Morris and Winter (1978) argue, however, that

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the causal relationship is actually reversed. They suggest that it is not the duration of residence that influences satisfaction, but satisfaction which leads to a longer duration of residence.

The relationship between the social life of residents and satisfaction with the community is the subject of much debate because of the multifaceted nature of social interactions. When social scientists first began to stress the importance of social factors in the community planning process (Gans, 1961), they were responding to the assertions of urban planners and some social scientists that the physical layout of the built environment (housing arrangements and community structures) plays a prominent role in determining friendships. Community and dwelling layouts, designed to promote frequent interactions among residents, were thought to provide a mechanism for initiating and maintaining relationships. For instance, Festinger, Schacter, and Back (1950) assert that "friendships will be determined in large part by physical and functional distance" (p.57).

Subsequent research argues vociferously that spatial determinism is an inadequate explanation for friendships and that, while features of the built environment may help foster initial social contacts, they are not enough to lead to close, intimate friendships (Gans, 1961; Rosow, 1961).

One factor emerging as an important criterion for close friendships is social homogeneity. Byrne (1971) argues that there is a strong relationship between attitude similarity and attraction. Curry and Emerson (1970) point out that activity similarity is also important for the formation of friendships. Kandel (1978) and Werner and Parmelee (1979) find that similarity of behavioral activities are important contributors to friendships. Ashton (1980) finds that shared interests are often important in friendship formation. Perceived similarity also seems to influence friendship formation and, according to Cavior, Miller, and Cohen (1975), Cavior and Docecki (1973) and Duck (1973), the perception of similarity may have greater impact on the social bond than actual similarity.

These studies all suggest that the social characteristics of residents, not the physical characteristics of their environments alone, are important for friendships and social bonding. Although arguments regarding spatial determinism vs. social determinism have become much less of a problem in the planning process, the direct relationship between social interaction and community satisfaction is still not clear. While many studies examine how social interactions with similar others affect friendships, fewer studies empirically examine the relationship between social interaction and feelings of satisfaction with community life (Lansing et al., 1970). Yet if perceptions of similarity and associations with similar others leads to close friendships, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the perceived availability of similar others should contribute to residents' satisfaction with the community. This should also be a stronger relationship than that between frequency of social interactions and community satisfaction. That is the focus of this paper.

Another satisfaction factor also needs to be discussed. Changes in feelings of satisfaction over the course of one's lifespan, with regard to developmental changes in the family, are well documented.

Research findings indicate that progression through the family life cycle affects satisfaction with such dimensions as one's social relationships, roles and activities and with "life" itself (Deutscher, 1964; Stinnett, Carter, and Montgomery, 1972; Glenn, 1975). Michelson (1977) and Kaplan (1980, 1981) indicate that family demands, particularly as they arise at different times during the family life cycle, also affect community satisfaction. In addition, Morris and Winter (1975, 1978) argue that residential satisfaction depends heavily on whether housing conditions meet family norms that are determined, to a large extent, by the family life cycle. Although focusing on housing and the neighborhood, their findings corroborate those just cited.

The family life cycle influences not only satisfaction, but also the frequency with which one engages in social activities and the selection of friends (Lowenthal, Thurnher, and Chiriboga, 1975). Because both factors are of interest in this investigation, the effects of the family life cycle are controlled in the present analysis of the relationship between the perceived availability of similar others and the frequency of social interactions and community satisfaction.

PROCEDURES

This paper relied on two major sources of data on married women: 1) responses from women who live in a suburban community in the northeastern United States and 2) selected items from national U.S. surveys. The community data yielded findings that are applicable to women experiencing a similar environment in an actual community. The national survey data provided the advantage of large numbers and generalizability to the population as a whole.

While the community was of special interest because it allowed one to examine the availability of similar others in a *natural* setting, it did not offer information on the frequency of interactions. Such data were available for analysis, however, from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) General Social Science Surveys. The individuals interviewed for the NORC Surveys were a representative cross-section of the total non-institutionalized population, 18-years-old and older, living in the United States. Since the NORC Surveys did not collect data on the availability of similar others, one-to-one comparisons of the different social interactions cannot be made. Both sets of data together, however, provided enough material for an exploratory and informative assessment.

NATIONAL SAMPLE

Composite interview data collected from 2012 married women who participated in the General Social Surveys of NORC were analyzed using path analytic techniques. Data for 1974, 1975, 1977 and 1978 surveys were examined. These surveys were selected because they covered a comparable time period for the available community data as well as including the appropriate interview questions.

Frequency of Interactions.

After intercorrelations were examined, a composite measure of frequency of interactions was created by summing the responses of

residents to the following questions:

1. How often do you spend a social evening with someone who lives in your community?
2. How often do you spend a social evening with friends who live outside your neighborhood?
3. How often do you spend a social evening with relatives?
4. How often do you go to a bar or tavern?

Although some questions refer to activities outside a community, the occurrence (and, indirectly, their accessibility) is considered to be an important aspect of community life. The questions selected as objective measures of the frequency of social interactions were initially selected on the basis of their face validity. Pearson product moment correlations, using pairwise deletion of missing data, and cluster analysis techniques were then performed and the composite measure was constructed.

In order to improve the level of measurement of each item, the original seven-point scale of each item was recoded to indicate estimated frequencies per year of the interaction, thus giving an estimated count of the social interactions: Never=0; About once a year=1; Several times a year=5; About once a month=12, Several times a month=30; Once or twice a week=75; Almost every day=350. The spread of responses was made to approach a more normal curve by using the logarithms of the responses for analysis.

Community Satisfaction.

The NORC Surveys asked one question pertaining to community satisfaction; respondents were asked if they were satisfied with the city or place they lived, according to a seven-point scale of low-to-high satisfaction. The question was worded in such a way to emphasize satisfaction with a larger residential area and, thus, was acceptable as an attitudinal measure of community satisfaction.

Family Life Cycle.

A seven-stage model of family development was constructed, based on the presence of children, age of oldest child living at home and the age of the respondent. This was a modified version of the standard model discussed by Duvall (1977):

1. Young married couple
2. Preschool family
3. School family
4. Teenage family
5. Launching family (oldest child leaves home)
6. Empty nest (children have left home)
7. Aging couple

Tests for curvilinearity were carried out by examining the mean response to the frequency of interactions and community satisfaction variables at each stage of the family life cycle. This was of particular concern because the family life cycle has been found to have curvilinear relationships with some variables - a violation of the assumption of linearity for path analysis. The results indicate that curvilinearity was not a problem.

Although the family life cycle model used in this analysis is useful for community studies of this type, in which the female participants are all married and from intact families, refinements to the model which take into account such things as childless couples and single-parent families are needed.

COMMUNITY DATA

The analysis of the availability of similar others and community satisfaction was based on data collected in a northeastern United States suburban community, located approximately 60 miles from two major urban centers (Keller, 1976). The total population of the community was approximately 14,000. Interview data of 180 married women residents, predominantly middle class and white, were examined.

Perceived Availability of Similar Others

A composite scale of the perceived availability of similar others was created by summing the responses to each of the following questions (i.e., the higher the number of positive responses, the easier it is believed to have interactions with similar people):

1. Do you feel it is easy to meet people like you in this community?
2. Do you feel it easy to meet people who are like you in interests?
3. Do you feel it is easy to meet people who are like you in family situations?
4. Do you feel it is easy to meet people who are like you in age?

As with the NORC data, the components of the measure of perceived availability of similar others were initially selected on the basis of their face validity. In this study, however, the questions examined the ease with which selected interactions could be made. After performing a cluster analysis on these items, the composite measure was constructed.

Community Satisfaction

The community study included one global question on residents' satisfaction which closely approximated the NORC question, "In general, how do you like living in _____?" (During the interview, the actual name of the community was stated.) Responses were based on a five-point scale of low-to-high satisfaction.

Family Life Cycle

The women in the community sample were grouped by stages of the family life cycle according to the same criteria used for the NORC data. Due to limitations of sample size, however, the model used in this analysis was comprised of five stages. The launching period, empty nest and aging couple stages were collapsed into one last stage.

RESULTS

The results of separate path analyses of the NORC and community data are shown in Figure 1. The findings indicate that the direct paths from the family life cycle to community satisfaction and to the two different social interaction variables are similar in direction and magnitude. A major difference occurs, however, with regard to the effect of the social interaction variables on community satisfaction. Specifically, the paths indicate that perceived availability of similar others has a much stronger influence on community satisfaction than does frequency of interactions for the NORC sample. This finding supports the hypothesis of the paper. (The effects of education were controlled in a separate analysis. No significant differences in results were found.)

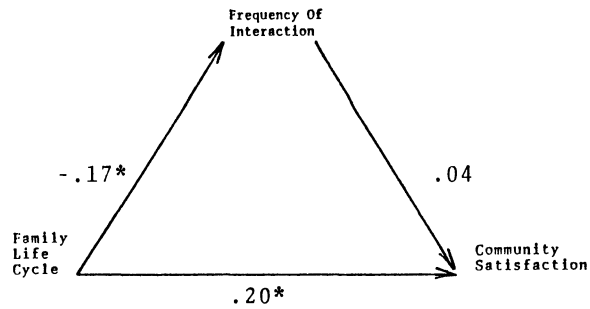
The paths to community satisfaction in the NORC model also reveal two interesting, but distinct, effects of the family life cycle. While modest, the family life cycle has a direct, linear and positive effect on community satisfaction (i.e, women in later stages of the family life cycle are more satisfied with their communities than are women in early stages of the family life cycle). This is consistent with the results of studies investigating the relationship of the family life cycle to feelings of satisfaction with life in general. In addition, the family life cycle has a modest direct effect on frequency of interactions, but in the opposite direction from its effect on community satisfaction. Women in early stages of the family life cycle have more frequent social interactions than do women in later stages of the cycle. It is interesting to note that while these results seem to contradict the early assertions of Young and Willmott (1957), the findings are consistent with later studies focusing on people in advanced stages of the life cycle (Lowenthal et al., 1975; Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson, 1972).

Each of the individual items which comprise the composite frequency scale as well as the composite scale were also entered into the path analysis separately. The results indicate that the relationship among family life cycle, the composite scale and community satisfaction are the strongest and most interesting. These are the results illustrated in Figure 1. Since the impact of the family life cycle is not the key question under investigation, this paper discusses it only briefly.

The results of the analysis of the data from the community sample indicate that not only does the perceived availability of similar others influence community satisfaction in a positive direction, but it also *mediates* the effect of the family life cycle. Even though the family life cycle has a positive direct effect on community satisfaction, women in later stages of the cycle who perceive they are less likely to meet similar others are also less satisfied with their community.

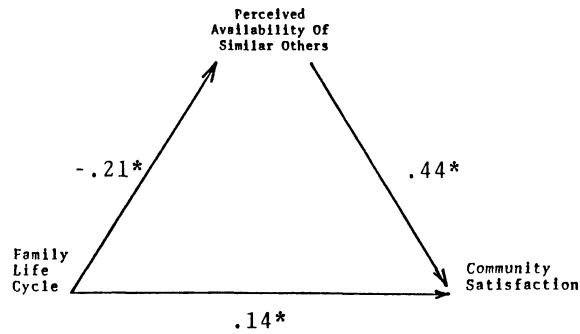
FIGURE 1
Results of Path Analysis

A. NORC DATA



	\bar{x}	S.D.
Family Life Cycle	4.33	1.88
Frequency of Interaction	4.31	1.10
Community Satisfaction	2.82	1.50
N =	1964	
Missing Data =	48	
	2012	

B. COMMUNITY DATA



	\bar{x}	S.D.
Family Life Cycle	2.45	1.02
Perceived Availability of Similar Others	5.09	1.27
Community Satisfaction	1.90	.87
N =	162	
Missing Data =	18	
	180	

*p < .05

In sum, these results suggest that different aspects of social interactions (i.e., frequency vs. perceived availability of similar others) influence community satisfaction in different ways. Although frequency of interactions does not seem to be strongly related to community satisfaction, when women feel that they are able to meet similar others, at least in regard to such things as family situations, age and interests, they tend to be more satisfied with the community in which they live.

CONCLUSIONS

The success of effective housing policies and community planning depends largely on the sensitivity of planners and developers to what people want from their communities. Sensitivity, however, may be limited by feelings of ethnocentrism or lack of awareness of others' needs. Housing and community policies would be more effective if they are based on data collected from on-site investigations. The lack of on-site investigations is a particular problem for many studies focusing on social interaction. Mikula (1975), for instance, points out that few works examine factors contributing to the development and maintenance of long-term relationships. Instead, the studies focus on determinants of attraction in *superficial contact situations*. Kandel (1978) also echoes the same criticism. Ravitz (1982) reminds us that successful community development is a "grass roots" process resulting from input at the local community level.

In addition, the findings of this investigation are relevant for policies directed to the development of communities that are intended to be *stable* locations for families at different points of development, not simply transient locations for people always on the move, or for people at a single stage in life (i.e., retirement communities). This study also contributes to the growing literature on women and community life, an often neglected area of community development. Stoneall (1983) asserts that the concept of community itself needs to be expanded to include the impact of women and their changing roles.

Although the findings of this study strongly suggest that the influence of the availability of similar others on community satisfaction be seriously considered in development and policy decisions, the actual process behind interactions among similar others is often ambiguous. One must not make hasty generalizations with regard to the criteria used to choose friends. The criteria for interactions among similar others used in this study represent very general aspects of one's life. There are actually many individual differences with respect to personal and social experiences and backgrounds. The impact of these conditions needs to be investigated before further policies can be planned with regard to community growth and the integration of different lifestyles into one community.

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