Where in the World is My Community? It is Online and around the World according to Missionary Kids

Colleen Loomis, PhD & Dana Friesen, MSW

Colleen Loomis, PhD is an Associate Professor, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada; and Senior Researcher of International Dimensions of Education, University of Geneve, Switzerland.

Dana Friesen, MSW is a social worker in Toronto, Ontario, Canada with a specialization in community development.

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Abstract

Having physical access to a community and having a sense of community is not always an easy option for Third Culture Kids (TCKs) who live in a culture other than their parents' native cultures such as missionary families and government and non-governmental agency workers located in various countries around the world. One TCK stakeholder (a co-author) decided to practice creating community and research by conducting a participatory action research project with a goal of engaging a subgroup of TCKs called missionary kids (MKs) to meet online and to create a sense of community. Participants (N = 20) ages 16 to 40 joined website discussions and influenced how the website was developed and operated in addition to allowing their online postings to be used as data to study sense of community among MKs. Data were analyzed using McMillan and Chavis's (1986) four dimensions of sense of community: membership, bi-directional influence, needs fulfillment, and shared emotional connection. Findings show that MKs connected through the Internet, developed a sense of community, influenced how the website functioned, took control of online community regulations and norms, and provided social support for one another. The website started in 2004 with two members and in 2011 had 1801 community members. Findings have implications for expanding theories of sense of community and for practices to create and sustain online communities.

Introduction

The practice of community psychology involves engaging in communities, either communities we are already members of or those we are invited into to address a problem. Our forms of engagement have historically been through in-person contact and phone and email communications as well as an occasional listserv feature for communicating. Web-based material was largely used as an unidirectional, static, and informative tool until recent changes created the capacity for communications to be dynamic and interactive rendering the web as a multi-purpose tool for the work of community psychologists (Brunson & Valentine, 2010). This study reports on a participatory action research project (PAR) led by a former undergraduate student of community psychology (a co-author). She had an interest in practicing what she learned about sense of community to see if it could be built on the World Wide Web by, for, and with individuals who were formerly children of missionaries. She remembered sometimes feeling a lack of sense of community as an adolescent, and thought that this would give her a unique perspective on the situation.

Feeling a sense of community (SOC) can be challenging for some children and youth who do not have opportunities to be part of one community due to parents' work (e.g., military, diplomat, Christian missionaries), resulting in feelings of isolation. Being a newcomer in one setting and having absences from one's home culture limits possibilities for developing social support and experiencing SOC. In these circumstances, some youth seem to transcend local cultures (whether at home or away) or blend two or more cultures creating a third culture. Third Culture Kids (TCKs; Useem & Downie, 1976) are individuals who have spent a significant part of childhood living in a 'host' culture, as well as their 'home' or 'passport' culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Tamura & Furnham, 1993). A key aspect of the concept of TCKs is the temporary nature of living in other cultures and the possibility of relocation; even if one lives in a host culture for a significant part of life the family generally has intentions to return (or returns regularly) to the home culture. Consequently, children of immigrants and refugees generally are not considered TCKs.

Missionary Kids (MKs) often live in remote villages without easy access to familiar cultural resources such as customs in neighbours' homes, schooling, and youth activities. Consequently, MKs are at risk for alienation from the host culture in which they live and their passport culture when they return. In both cultures, they have been labelled by some peers as outsiders based on social markers such as language (e.g., not knowing youth slang), clothing (not being aware of local norms), not understanding jokes, references to pop-culture, music, and so on. These relational aspects of group membership are expected because of sharing a common geographical (i.e., place-based) community, yet for some MKs having a place-based sense of community is challenging.

Much research on MKs is phenomenological in nature, exploring the production of meaning in

missionary families (Bolhouse, 1999), and MKs' perceptions of their lifestyle (Kim, 2001; Whitfield, 2003). Some research investigates childhood and adolescent transitions to and acculturation in a foreign or 'host' culture (Nathanson & Marcenko, 1995; Werkman, Farley, Butler, & Quayhagen, 1981), while other studies have focused on topics of re-entry and repatriation into the passport culture (Collier, 2008; Fray, 1988; Schultz, 1985; Sotherden, 1992). Adjustment to post-secondary education as it relates to the TCK re-entry process is an enduring topic of interest within MK research, as many TCKs graduating from international high schools return to their country of citizenship to enroll in college or university (e.g., Hervey, 2009; Huff, 2001; Moss, 1985; Wrobbel, 2005). Implicit in these studies is a concern for youths' SOC.

In the extant literature SOC is a psychological effect of being in relation with one or more groups that have communal characteristics such as sharing collective resources, responsibilities, experiences, and values as well as developing trust and spirit with a group (McMillan, 1996). A frequently used conceptualization of SOC (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) has four dimensions, with no particular developmental sequence specified: membership, bi-directional influence, needs fulfillment, and a shared emotional connection. This conceptualization exists in geographical communities (e.g., Plas & Lewis, 1996) such as a neighbourhood club and in relational communities and relates to youth participating in certain groups (Obst & White, 2007; Wrighting, 2006) such as a community of competitive chess players or young musicians. With access to the Internet increasing in many parts of the world there is a possibility for individuals to create community in virtual contexts such as the online video gaming community, those who share professional interests, survivors of cancer, and many more.

The history of online communities is relatively young, about 30 years, and the tools available for interaction are many and varied, changing business and personal communication, accelerating the speed of exchange and making information more easily and widely accessible to a larger audience (Brunson & Valentine, 2011): email, blog, chat (typing text), voice, video, social networking. A number of sites focus on unidirectional communications, which act as a consumption model providing information (Spoel, 2008), while others facilitate dialogue and relationships with other individuals. It is the interaction with other humans via a computer that interests us as a possible resource for social and emotional support. A pioneer online community is WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), launched in 1985. Members of WELL and other early online communities reported that members developed close friendships (Reid, 1995), provided emotional support and shared resources (Rheingold, 1993; Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2002).

The use of online communities for social and emotional support is of particular interest to the helping professions and educators. McKenna and Green (2002) found that the Internet provides a central location or meeting place for individuals who are unable to meet regularly with similar others at a single geographical location and that online social support networks are beneficial for those who experience social anxiety or loneliness and time restrictions. Several other studies examining social networks via the Internet have found strengthened social support for online participants (Barrera, Glasgow, McKay, Boles, & Feil, 2002; Kruger, Maital, Macklem, Shriberg, Burgess, & Kalinsky, 2001; McKenna & Green, 2002).

Online support forums have reduced stress among peace activists (Kinnevy & Enosh, 2002), single mothers, (Dunham, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusella, Ellsworth, & Dodd, 1998), women experiencing mid-life transitions (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002), and those facing health-related challenges such as depression (Salem, Bogat, & Reid, 1997) and alcohol addiction (Klaw, Heubsch, & Humphreys, 2002). Researchers studying distance education have found that it is possible to build a sense of community within a virtual learning environment (e.g., Belanger, 2008; Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Taken all together findings from research to date provide evidence that the Internet can be a medium for social support and sense of community.

It seems to reason that children and youth of missionaries may benefit from social support via the Internet. Websites exists for TCKs and MKs, such as Interaction International (www.tckinteract.net) and TCK World (www.tckworld.com) that offer information. These sites do not provide social support or a platform for individuals to interact. Another website, TCKid (www.tckid.com), facilitates social support and information exchange opportunities but does not specialize in serving MKs in particular. Community-style websites for alumni of particular international or boarding schools provide a model for using the Internet as a tool for a group of geographically diverse individuals to interact yet because these sites are restricted to those who attended certain institutions many MKs are excluded. Further, these sites do not have a specific intention of

engaging MKs, in particular, to offer emotional and social support and to foster SOC.

In the present PAR study, we asked two research questions. Can missionary kids come together via a website to create and sustain community? What are members' experiences of SOC in this online community? Based on previous research findings, we expected that a sense of community may be developed online, however, there was not enough research evidence to predict sustainability of a virtual community, but we can explore the success of an online community using criteria offered by Iriberri and Leroy (2009) who reviewed studies of online communities across disciplines and concluded the following: "The most common metrics used in the empirical research we reviewed were "volume of members' contribution and quality of relationships among members. Researchers who focus on measuring success agree that, the larger the volume of messages posted and the closer members feel to each other, the more successful the online community becomes" (Iriberri & Leroy, 2009, p. 10). For the second research question, we expected to find at least some of the four dimensions in the McMillan and Chavis (1986) model of SOC. Overall we sought to address for, with, and by MKs a problem of the absence of SOC. This experience seemed to be unrelated to living in a home culture or elsewhere, and to address a common question by MKs: "Where in the world is my community?"

Method

Design and Sampling

We used a descriptive, one-group design with a PAR approach, which is the process of taking collective action to address a particular issue within a community (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) such that conditions are designed to produce a particular effect. A former MK (a co-author) and her peers performed the actions to build community via a website and they conducted research with an outsider (a co-author who is not an MK). Community and research participants were recruited in the same ways through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) using email messages sent from an MK (co-author) to known mission organizations, international and boarding schools, TCK and MK organizations, missionary member care agencies, and universities and colleges with large TCK populations. Individuals had the option of joining the community with or without participating in research; those who participated in the research part had a chance to win one of two $20 (U.S. dollar) gift certificates to Amazon.com.

Sample Participants and Intervention Description

Sixty individuals volunteered to participate in the study by signing a consent form and one-third of these became participants (N = 20) through contributions to the community dialogue used in the study. At the time of the study participants were geographically located on all continents except Antarctica. The actions of building a virtual community (described below in procedure) and conducting research within it took place online via Internet access.

Procedure

Before the beginning of this research study the primary objective (of the MK co-author) was to create a virtual space where MKs may meet, socialize, and experience community with other MKs (i.e., create SOC), always with the intention that the website hosting this virtual space would be sustained indefinitely beyond the objective of researching SOC. The research aspect of the PAR was conducted in order to assess if SOC developed and if so to understand how the conceptualized four components by McMillan and Chavis (1986) function in a virtual community to create SOC. The relationship between action and feedback on research was ensured by the primary stakeholder (who co-designed and co-hosted the website) moderating the site, collecting and analyzing data; her knowledge of both the action and the research created an automatic feedback loop from research findings into the design and functionality of the online community/website, supporting the goal of PAR.

One of the first steps in developing the website was to find a name that incorporated the notion of a collective online meeting-place as well as the recognition of MKs' varied geographical locations. The website was named mkPLANET. It was designed and developed with numerous resources and opportunities for member involvement that required the website be dynamic (rather than static), while at the same time setting up some restrictions to avoid abuse so the website began with rules developed by the second author who moderated all website activity to enforce the rules (this point is elaborated in the findings below).

There are three conceptual areas of the website. First, there is a public area for general information (e.g., MK/TCK-related articles, areas listing relevant web and print resources). Second, is the center of the website that is a communal area where access to the forums is restricted to registered members only with virtual functions such as a large discussion forum, private messaging capabilities, designated locations

for members' contributions (e.g., poetry, memoirs, and artwork), a community calendar, personal photo albums, personal journals, a recipe section, and profiles specifically designed to allow members to share their life stories.

Third, in order to comply with ethical issues of research with human participants, as controlled by a Canadian Institutional Review Board, a portion of the forums were set aside strictly for discussions related to this study. An announcement and pop-up box on the website invited MKs to participate in the research. Data were collected over a period of three months from material written by the MKs who agreed to contribute to the research; most data were drawn from forum discussions, participants' articles, poetry, and memoirs.

Data Analysis

The raw qualitative data were managed using the QSR NVIVO software. In the first round of analysis online postings (i.e., text) were read and categorized by the MK stakeholder (a co-author) according to an a priori codebook comprised of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) four elements of SOC (membership, influence, needs fulfillment, and shared emotional connection); data that did not fit the codebook (e.g., mission experiences, critiques of the religion being raised in) were excluded from this study and used as part of another study on MK identity and experiences. Because we were working with a particular theoretical framework the first step was completed alone. Then, in keeping with the PAR approach (Patton, 2002) we invited research participants to engage in the data analysis process; 5 of the 20 participants (three women and two men) were involved in this stage of analysis. In the next step, the team of researchers and participants read and coded the text, one SOC theme at a time, looking for sub-categories within each of the four elements. For example, within the broad category of membership data were further coded. Then, using a consensus approach, axial coding was performed where these sub-categories were condensed into meaningful units; this last step required multiple passes through the data.

Findings

Examining the first research question we found that an online community of geographically dispersed MKs was developed for, by, and with their actions through a website that persisted for more than seven years, being launched in 2004 and growing from two initial members (coauthors) to 1801 members in 2011. Analysis of text showed that all four components of McMillan and Chavis's (1986)

conceptualization existed in mkPLANET. These findings are presented below in descending order from the most salient categories (based on the frequency of text members wrote) to the least salient, but still present: shared emotional connection, membership, influence, and needs fullfilment.

Shared Emotional Connection

In mkPLANET shared emotional connection was illustrated in six different ways. One way members connected was through what we call life updates. Some mkPLANET members posted updates on events occurring in their lives as a means of generating discussion, seeking advice, or finding others who relate to their experiences. Members also posted minor events, such as daily activities and results of a recent school assignment (e.g., "I just ate a grilled peanut butter sandwich for supper and moved a drum set into our basement for the band we are putting together, and I also jammed with the guys: lots of fun." Participant 50). Members often posted major situations occurring in their lives at the moment, such as an upcoming transition, (e.g., "Please keep praying - it looks like the time has come when we need to leave this church." Participant 59).

The second way emotional connecting was demonstrated was through building connections, which refers to members learning about the mkPLANET community and its members (e.g., remembering where other members have lived), familiarity with community milestones (e.g., "isn't it a remarkable coincidence that I've made my 300th post on the same day that this site got it's 300th member?" Participant 49), and becoming familiar enough with other members to develop nicknames or terms of endearment for one another (e.g., "Lil' sis", Participant 59).

Another way that MKs emotionally connected was with storytelling that developed a sense of camaraderie. For instance, responding to one member's post about her childhood, a second member wrote the following response: "That brings back so many memories! Not that I had a Barbie car or anything - just the playing outside, and pretending. Oh the stories I could tell!" and "I both fit in everywhere (...), and yet truly fit in almost nowhere. I would wager that most of us in here know exactly what I mean without my needing to explain it - which is why I love this place." (Participant 59).

The fourth sub-theme of shared emotional connection that emerged was encouragement. In these instances members expressed concern, empathy, happiness, and similar sentiments saying, for example, "Hey that was good!!! Pick up your self-esteem there!!!"

(Participant 47), and "Don't ever be ashamed or scared to say what you believe!" (Participant 59).

Another way of sharing emotions was with humour in the form of friendly competitions, playful teasing, for comic relief during intense discussions, or simply for the sake of sharing jokes. One member wrote in support of another member: "You're not that [weird] or out of kilter…!!! and if they still think you are- it's us two against [them]!!!!!!" (Participant 47). Another member wrote, "I'm definitely a cold blooded person. …transition from hot to cold is certainly not easy!!!!! This convo is so funny!!! It's good to know there are others suffering out in the cold." (Participant 39). Through the use of humor members expressed a side of themselves that seemed fun and genuine.

The last component of shared emotional connection observed was vulnerability and openness. There was a level of emotional comfort that enabled members to share deeply personal experiences, beliefs, or emotions. One member shared about his battle with cancer, another person shared her feelings about an upcoming cross-cultural move, and another one spoke of the troubling conflict occurring within his church. Some members also recognized the value of this openness. One member wrote: "This is so much fun. Thanks you all for being there to meet and talk and have fun with!!!!" (Participant 47).

Membership

Membership at mkPLANET consisted of establishing a username and personal account information that then permitted access to the entire website (vs. visitors whose access is limited). Beyond registering on the website, mkPLANET members also created other forms of membership. Four sub-themes of membership emerged. The first sub-theme we have termed 'beyond the virtual' because it captures members' efforts at making virtual friendships tangible. One member wrote, "Please keep me posted on a S/E reunion. …I'm in Illinois and a trip to Tennessee wouldn't be too difficult" (Participant 44). As alluded to in this quote, the most notable instance of this sub-theme was a 2005 'reunion' that 13 members organized and attended in Tennessee, United States of America. Members' words and conduct in the forums also served to personalize interactions. For instance, one person wrote jokingly: "Right on! Gives … virtual high fives with great gusto" (Participant 59). This member communicated an action by using words over the Internet.

Hospitality and inclusiveness were prominent features of the MK virtual community. The forum system assigned new members with the label "Newbie" when first posting in the forum; this label was successively replaced with others as members made 50 or more posts, 100 or more posts, and so on. Many established members posted welcoming messages, and many new members, in turn, expressed gratitude. Members wrote messages such as, "Welcome to our world, …! You ought to go to the Newbies/intro section and tell everyone a bit about yourself! It is good to have you in here!" (Participant 59) and "Greetings and welcome…! I think you [will find] kindred spirits here." (Participant 59).

A third component of membership was being an ambassador and recruiting others. One member commented: "[I] know several people who have lived there. I just [haven't] been able to convince them to get on here." (Participant 50). A final theme of membership was shared goals and service. Those who were most involved on the website took ownership of various aspects of the community. Some, for instance, took leadership positions in the forums, while others shared in the task of organizing the 2005 Tennessee reunion.

Influence

In the context of the mkPLANET community, members influenced one another through dialogue and the structure of the website itself because of the inexpensive and dynamic aspect of the Internet. Members contributed to community growth and change by giving their input on various website- and community-related decisions, such as the creation of new forums dedicated to certain topics of interest (e.g., Aviation and Role Playing Games) and by being involved in the development of mkPLANET's policies and guidelines (e.g., prohibiting inappropriate language and use of the site resources). The care for providing a community without danger of interpersonal attacks went beyond policies to include practices. Highly active members ensured that the community tone was positive and supportive. As one member wrote: "This is a safe place to [express], question, and learn. We are all out there on the fringe in one way or another anyway!" (Participant 59). Influence was also observed in members developing trusting relationships where suggestions or alternative approaches to responding to various situations occurred; on a number of occasions members responded to suggestions from other members by saying that they would consider a situation further.

Needs Fulfillment

mkPLANET members also fulfilled each others' needs as reflected in four sub-themes. The first sub-theme in this category is guidance and advice,

referring to members exchanging advice on personal issues. One member introduced herself saying, "Hi- I am an MK and just found out about this site- I seem to still be adjusting to the US after 2 1/2 years here and would love to hear how other MK's are doing…" (Participant 41). One notable conversation began when an adult MK, now a parent of MKs, asked current MKs for advice on how to support his children. This request for advice triggered a thoughtful conversation and seemed to meet the member's need. Members also shared advice on upcoming transitions, challenges with family life, and exchanged tips for procedures and functions of the website. As one member told a newcomer to the website, "If you [don't] know how to or [don't] know what to do just ask." (Participant 50).

The third sub-theme of networking also met a need for community members as evidenced by their references to a vast interconnected network of people, places and organizations within a larger missions' community. As one member commented, "I grew up in Burkina Faso, and was excited to see a bunch of you guys were from there." (Participant 37). mkPLANET members helped one another with finding connections when needed. For instance, while one member was arranging the accommodations for an overseas internship, others were able to offer backup assistance. As one member wrote, "And if, for some reason it does not work out with this family - please let us know. We can help find another host family for you if we need to!" (Participant 59).

The final sub-theme, members' need for resources, particularly sharing information, was met within the mkPLANET community. A common example would be making book suggestions, such as one member who wrote: "If you haven't read The Rani Adventures ... by Ron Snell, you should..... it's a highly humorous ... autobiography about growing up as a Wycliffe/SIL MK in Peru" (Participant 60). Occasionally members exchanged financial resources or other materials between members via mail or in person.

Discussion

This study serves as an illustration of how the work of creating community can be accomplished online and how participatory action research can start with one insider stakeholder identifying a problem, based on personal experiences and anecdotes in her social network, and it can be mobilized to a group of stakeholders. Under the leadership of a MK (who was an undergraduate student interested in community psychology practices) geographically dispersed MKs created and sustained an online community called

mkPLANET that started in 2004 with 2 members and in 2011 had over 1800 members. We use the term sustain to refer to its still being in existence. The life cycle of online communities is inception, creation, growth, maturity, and death. . . . [and the maturity phase is comprised of] regulations, subgroups, trust, and relationships" (Iriberri & Leroy, 2009, p. 14). Findings from our study support an interpretation that mkPLANET is in a stage of maturity. Returning to Iriberri and Leroy's criteria of successful online communities as "volume of members' contribution and quality of relationships among members" we conclude that mkPLANET is a successful online community. This virtual community is still active at the time of writing this manuscript. The website is replete with members' contributions and the quality of relationships is high, as reflected in online exchanges and some members deciding to meet in person; this latter point also is an example of transitioning the "cyberspace into real space" (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002). These findings of social support via the Internet are consistent with previous research of online support (e.g., McKenna & Green, 2002).

From this study we learn that McMillan and Chavis's (1986) conceptualization of SOC is relevant to virtual communities, with some variation in how membership, bi-directional influence, needs fulfillment, and a shared emotional connection manifest. For community members of mkPLANET the most prominent dimension of SOC is a shared emotional connection. This finding relates to Chipuer and Pretty's (1999) definition of shared emotional connection, which states that it is "the emotional support stemming from the struggles and successes of community living" (p. 646). MKs share struggles and successes too, but not those that come from living in geographical closeness with one another. Concerning the dimension of membership, in the context of a website the term 'member' has a more technical sense, in that membership only requires registration at the website. Thus it is possible for people to be members yet rarely or never interact within an electronic community. Membership in an online community is also relatively simple to obtain. There are usually no fees or restrictions, and joining does not require the investment of time or resources. Membership can also be completely anonymous, which is a characteristic unique to online communities not found in communities where members meet in person. Members in this study go beyond being a registered member and develop membership through interpersonal interactions that include disclosing personal experiences, giving and

receiving advice, and much more in the online community.

Intertwined in feelings of membership are aspects of the SOC dimensions of influence and needs fulfillment. Members influence one another through dialog and the website itself, which is made possible by the inexpensive and dynamic aspect of web development. Members also influence each other with the tone of their interactions as well as the content such as providing personal guidance, advice, and sometimes tangible resources (e.g., lending money), information about mkPLANET, suggesting changes to the website, and rules and rewards. Proposed website modifications are discussed among the members before coming to a collective conclusion, and then when feasible the website administrator (an MK and a co-author of this manuscript) implements the changes. An important note is that this online community started with rules set by the community psychology practitioner (who is also an insider to the community) and progressed to decisions made collectively by the mkPLANET community, and this change reflects a progression from a rules system to a reward system. This finding is consistent with Iriberri and Leroy's analysis that there is a time for rules and a time for rewards in community building (2009). These characteristics of SOC taken together suggest that trust is an important part of influence, for both members trying to influence others and for members to be open to being influenced. This finding is consistent with the conceptualization that trust is a necessary component of psychological sense of community (McMillian, 1996).

Limitations

The small sample size in this study is not representative of all MKs, nor is it representative of all Internet social support groups. Findings are generalizable only to those individuals who self-select to participate in mkPLANET via the interactive, dynamic website. Another limitation of the study is that we initiated the research at the outset of developing the website. If the study were to be conducted now with the website firmly established with over 1800 members the findings would probably differ. SOC may look differently depending upon whether members actively participate in forming a community.

Also, this research is limited by the variable ways in which PAR was applied in the early stages and in systematically documenting how the feedback of information from research shaped future actions in the online community. One lead MK stakeholder had

an idea and collaborated with another stakeholder and the two of them alone built the initial website and determined the functioning and rules. These initial actions did not include all the participants of the study. Similarly, as text was exchanged on the website the lead MK stakeholder fed the information back to the virtual community for input and made subsequent changes to the website based on group input. This work was done iteratively and quickly multiple times; unfortunately, we did not take into consideration for this study to include these additional exchanges in the data analyzed. These limitations weakened our potential to see the full effect of PAR, yet may have accelerated actions taken, as often a leader is necessary for community-based initiatives.

Other limitations of this study are issues of self-selection of participants and the timing and duration of the study. Approximately one third of our sample participated in forum discussions, and only half of those participants were regularly and frequently contributing to the discussions. This lower participation rate may be an effect of labelling of the forum explicit for university-based research (from which data were collected) rather than framing it as the PAR that it was. As research online and participatory research are relatively new to commissions approving research conducted with individuals from a university we had some challenge with the wording of announcements for participating in research forums and it required an extra step to complete an online consent form.

Nonetheless, the 30% participation rate raises questions about the practical significance of these findings. So to explore this point further, another explanation for declining to participate in this online study may be an impression that participation would take more time, beyond time one has available to be online. Although we were not permitted by the ethics committee to use the text exchanged on mkPLANET by the 40 people who declined to participate in this study to analyze for group differences, we do have a sense of information exchanged among all members as one of us was the website moderator and this information is publicly available to both of us and everyone who is a mkPlanet member. The impression left with us is that members who did not participate in the study have very similar postings to those that did. The fact that we had a 30% response rate in this case does not seem to suggest that other members are different from research participants in the ways in which they interact in this virtual community, perhaps the decision not to participate in research was due to time or some other variable unrelated to

sense of community. Future research can benefit from investing more time up front in educating and working with ethics approval boards and making a stronger argument for consent to participate in research that is engaging, reflecting PAR, and creating ways for online interactions used for research purposes not to take more time than natural online interactions.

Implications and Conclusions

Limitations withstanding, findings from this study have important implications for our practices as community psychologists to use the Internet as a tool to develop a sense of community, particularly for those who are geographically scattered. These findings are specific to how SOC develops in a newly formed virtual community. This study shows the ease and effectiveness with which members of a common group are able to connect regardless of location. Recommendations for building an online community include choosing a distinct population (who have shared experiences though asynchronously and not in the same geographical place) and allowing community members a direct influence on how the website is designed in layout and in content. Another important aspect was for the rules and regulations to be negotiated and when this happened a rewards system developed.

A website developed with, for, and by MKs can create a virtual community. mkPLANET illustrates the development and continuance of a website created to promote a sense of community among a particular group of people with shared characteristics but many whom did not know one another before participating in this online community. This online community that started in 2004 has grown in both numbers of members and in level of activity by members. This study adds to the growing number of positive examples of virtual support communities, indicating that online support groups do indeed foster a sense of community and provide mutual support for regularly active members, specifically MKs in the case of this study. We conclude that McMillan and Chavis's (1986) conceptualization of SOC can provide a basis for understanding sense of virtual community and that we need to build onto this model to account for certain aspects of SOC that are quite distinct from in-person communities such as an increased focus on social interaction and an increased level of anonymity (McKenna & Green, 2002). We started this article by asking the question "Where in the world is my community?" and we end with a response. If I do not feel a sense of community with a local geographical community (e.g., with a neighbourhood where I reside or a school I attend)

then perhaps I will find that my community exists virtually around the world.

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