

The Relationship between College Students' Sense of Community and Mental Health

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Abstract: The school community is a crucial setting for college students' lives, and the sense of community within schools is a significant focus of community psychology research. This paper explores the relationship between sense of community and mental health, with a particular emphasis on how a sense of school community impacts psychological well-being. It offers suggestions for enhancing the sense of community in schools to promote the mental health development of college students, addressing both the development of internal psychological resources and external support systems.

1. The Relationship Between Sense of Community and Mental Health

Since the 21st century, the national push has led to an increasing focus on the mental health of college students. The "Comprehensive Strengthening and Improving the Special Action Plan for Student Mental Health Work in the New Era (2023-2025)" underscores the importance of student mental health and reflects the country's emphasis on this issue. In recent years, with the acceleration of the pace of life, mental health issues among students have become more prominent due to factors such as academic and employment pressures[1]. According to the "2022 National Mental Health Blue Book," adolescents aged 18-24 are at high risk for depression, with a detection rate of 24.1%. The "2023 National Mental Health Blue Book" reports that 38.26% of students are at risk for mild anxiety. Strengthening mental health education for college students has become a societal consensus, as this group faces mounting pressures related to academics and employment[2].

Sense of Community, also known as Psychological Sense of Community, was first introduced by Sarason in 1974, who considered it central to community psychology. Sarason conceptualized sense of community as a form of perception, where individuals first recognize their similarities with others in a group, and secondly, understand their mutual interdependence. This perception helps maintain relationships through fulfilling expectations and mutual support, thus creating a sense of belonging (Sarason, 1974)[3]. This sense of belonging is broader, more reliable, and stable.

As research on sense of community has advanced, the relationship between individuals and groups has received increasing attention from community psychologists. Sense of community is a significant factor influencing mental health. According to theories proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) and Nowell and Boyd (2010)[4], sense of community is an important factor affecting mental health. Higher levels of sense of community are associated with greater life satisfaction

(Baker & Palmer, 2006; Kutek, Turnbull, & Fairweather-Schmidt, 2011)[5]. Sense of community can also predict the severity and duration of depression, with higher levels of community belonging linked to lower depression scores and shorter durations of depression (Fowler, Wareham-Fowler, Barnes, 2013)[6].

A study on urban community residents in China found a significant relationship between sense of community and loneliness, which includes a sense of unmet needs (Ma Hong et al., 2022)[7]. In research on the elderly, Wang Wei (2022) found that sense of community has a positive effect on predicting community participation and well-being among this group[8]. Active participation in community activities provides more opportunities for interaction, strengthens psychological resilience, and reduces feelings of helplessness while enhancing self-worth and happiness. A survey of migrant workers in urban areas also highlighted the importance of sense of community, particularly in terms of attachment and identification with the city community (Wu Xueying et al., 2009)[9]. Therefore, sense of community is closely linked to mental health and is an integral aspect of well-being.

2. The Relationship Between Sense of Community and College Students' Mental Health

The concept of sense of community extends beyond specific locations, with schools being a key area of focus. Rovai et al. (2004) defined school sense of community as the feeling of belonging and safety within the school, trust in others[10], connections with others, a sense of support within the school, and shared goals and values among school members. Yu Ruying (2009)[11], in developing the "School Sense of Community Scale," defined school sense of community as an attitudinal experience of school members within the school context. Numerous studies have explored the relationship between sense of community and school mental health. For example, Fan Yancheng (2023) found that college students' sense of school community influences their civic engagement behaviors[12]. Students with a higher sense of school community are more willing to engage in voluntary activities as their involvement in civic behaviors increases[13]. Additionally, the research indicated that an enhanced sense of school community improves students' empathy abilities. A strong sense of belonging within the campus community fosters deep connections, which in turn enhances empathy, providing valuable social support for mental health development. Liu Yingshan (2023) demonstrated that school sense of community mediates the relationship between self-esteem and social anxiety, indirectly affecting social anxiety levels[14]. As the sense of community improves, social anxiety among students tends to decrease. Research on high school students has also shown that sense of community negatively predicts depression; an increased sense of community is associated with reduced depressive symptoms (Lin Songnan, 2019)[15]. Qu Haosen et al. (2019) found a positive correlation between college students' sense of school community and mental health, with sense of community having a significant predictive effect on students' mental health levels. The relationship between sense of community and mental health is mediated by factors such as needs satisfaction and community engagement behaviors.

In a study related to college students' social well-being, it was found that social support can indirectly affect social well-being through sense of community (Jiao Xuan, 2020)[16]. Collectively, these findings suggest that a strong sense of school community is closely related to mental health. Enhancing students' sense of community can improve their mental health levels, and both external personal resources and internal psychological strengths can effectively promote the development and enhancement of school sense of community. Thus, sense of community and students' mental health are closely interconnected.

3. How to Promote a Sense of Community in Schools and Enhance Mental Health Levels

3.1 Assisting Students in Developing Internal Psychological Strength to Promote a Sense of Community in Schools

Internal psychological strength includes various aspects such as self-esteem and psychological resilience. Research shows that self-esteem, an important factor in the development of college students, can enhance the sense of community in schools and thus impact individual mental health levels (Prezza & Costantini, 1998; Shields, 2008)[17]. As a protective factor for self-esteem, the social support system can be expanded by schools to improve students' sense of community. For instance, schools can invest in and develop student organizations, enhancing their diversity and abundance. Quality student organizations provide students with opportunities to find like-minded peers and increase chances for communication and cooperation. This expansion of interpersonal relationship support can improve self-esteem and thus enhance the sense of belonging on campus. Moreover, psychological counseling is a crucial method for helping individuals develop internal psychological strength. Schools should strengthen the promotion of counseling services, increase public education on mental health, and dispel traditional stigmas associated with psychological counseling. Students should be encouraged to focus on their inner development and to actively seek counseling when they have the need for self-exploration or encounter psychological issues. This can enhance their sense of psychological strength, leading to a positive acceptance and recognition of their environment.

3.2 Developing External Environmental Strengths to Promote a Sense of Community in Schools

3.2.1 Improve Classroom Environment and Teaching Quality to Enhance the Sense of Community

University classrooms, as the centers of advanced educational activities, are crucial venues for teaching interactions between faculty and students. For many students, a significant portion of their campus time is spent in the classroom (Tinto, 1997)[18]. Schools can leverage the small classroom environment to foster a high-quality atmosphere and a supportive class environment, further enhancing students' emotional attachment and identification with the school. Teachers, as one of the main pillars of higher education, should act as role models and guides, focusing on improving teaching quality and providing high-quality knowledge support and daily care. Therefore, by improving the classroom environment and teaching quality, and increasing close interactions between teachers and students, a sense of community within the school can be cultivated.

3.2.2 Improve the Residential Environment

Cheng (2004) mentions that the emotional attachment of resident students to the community can be acquired through participation in student club activities, which largely depends on the school providing a conducive dormitory environment for proactive living and learning. Research by Joanne D[19]. Worsley (2023)[20] and others shows that the residential environment affects daily activities, with communal interaction spaces within the community significantly impacting students' mental health. A good community environment provides opportunities for interpersonal interactions, which can strengthen social relationships through the use of communal spaces, helping students meet new friends and thereby reducing levels of depression and anxiety.

Given the existing conditions, schools can create a warm and comfortable dormitory environment for students by expanding living spaces, providing relatively open social venues,

setting up dedicated study rooms and activity rooms, and offering more convenient services for residential life. Additionally, schools can conduct regular surveys and visits to understand students' living conditions, needs, and psychological requirements in real-time, identifying and solving problems promptly through practical actions. This helps to establish good relationships and show students care and support. Moreover, to enhance the sense of community and identification, schools can organize diverse themed activities, such as community tea parties, psychological theme sharing, and community co-building activities, aiding students in forming connections with their environment and peers, and gradually developing a stable and harmonious community consciousness.

3.2.3 Establish a Campus Environment with Humanistic Care

School management should integrate more humanistic care factors so students can feel respected and cared for on campus, fostering a sense of belonging and positively influencing mental health development. Scholars argue for a holistic view of student development, extending beyond class construction to encompass the entire campus environment (Tinto, 1997)[21]. Schools should approach student relations from a human values and essence perspective, focusing on both spiritual and material aspects to build closer connections with students.

In creating a humanistic care campus environment, it is vital to engage deeply with the student body, understanding their psychological and emotional dynamics while providing enhanced care and support in various needs, including psychological, spiritual, knowledge, and skills. This cultivates a warm and harmonious environment conducive to student learning and growth. Additionally, promoting knowledge of campus history and culture is another aspect of establishing a humanistic care environment. Schools, being primary centers for cultural heritage, bear the responsibility of transmitting this legacy. The humanistic spirit, reflected in the school's history and cultural atmosphere, builds its foundational values. Scholars highlight the importance of meaningful campus cultural activities in fostering a sense of community (Elkins, Forrester, & Noelekins, 2011)[22]. Schools can facilitate this through diverse activities such as campus cultural exchange sessions, stage plays, microfilms, and themed exhibitions, encouraging students to engage in building and experiencing campus culture and thereby fostering an emotional connection with their alma mater. This not only enhances school cohesion and identification but also instills a sense of belonging and pride among students.

4. Conclusion

This article integrates previous research findings and the concept of a sense of school community to discuss the relationship between a sense of community in schools and mental health. It also provides recommendations on how to enhance college students' mental health by fostering a sense of community within the school. However, more empirical research is needed on how to enhance the sense of community in schools to develop students' mental health positively.

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