University Students Pilot a Community Survey at Ciclovia

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ABSTRACT

Social work students at a southeastern university piloted a community perception and attachment survey during a local Ciclovia event. Results indicated that a majority of participants held a generally positive view of the community (91%), while perceptions of specific aspects of the community and neighborhoods varied depending on individual items. Implications for use of students in community surveys are explored in addition to a presentation of the overall results of the survey.

Keywords: community attachment, pilot study, community engagement, student engagement

Ciclovia ("*open streets*") is an event held in cities around the world during which the streets are closed to vehicles and opened to citizens in an effort to promote health and community. This movement began in Bogotá, Columbia, over 30 years ago as a cycling event, and Ciclovia has been held in more than 400 cities since that time indicating their sustainability and scalability (Torres et al., 2013; Sarmiento et al., 2017). Research has indicated Ciclovia events have a positive effect on public activity and health (Engelberg et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2017).

On March 25, 2017, the first Ciclovia event was held in Pensacola, Florida. The purpose of Ciclovia Pensacola was to create an event in which the community could engage in physical activity, interact with others, and discover downtown Pensacola (Ciclovia, 2018). Pensacola is a city located in Escambia County, Florida, which is 19th in terms of population among Florida counties. Of the 309,966 county residents, 53,779 reside within the city limits of Pensacola (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Levels of community attachment are unknown for the greater Pensacola area. Social work students from a southeastern university piloted a community survey during a local event to collect data related to participants' perceptions of their

community and their neighborhood in an effort to determine the level of community attachment. Ciclovia Pensacola was chosen because it provided a forum where individuals from various parts of the community gathered to participate in community-centered activities related to health and well-being. This survey focused on individuals' perceptions of Pensacola as well as their individual neighborhoods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The meaning of place—also termed throughout the literature as sense of place, place attachment, place meaning, place identity, and place dependence (Nelson et al., 2020)—is central to the formation of identity in children and adults, and has implications for multiple domains of health and well-being, including physical and mental health and social support (Choi et al., 2015; Jack, 2015; Theodori, 2001). Children form attachments early on with people and also with places. Some places may be associated with security or happiness, and others with more negative feelings. While parents are the main source of attachment for young children, the home is where children begin developing an attachment to place (Jack, 2015). A healthy attachment to place can provide a secure

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foundation that encourages a child's development of identity and belonging.

In a study by Jack (2015), the effects of community attachment were not considered in making placement decisions for children in the child welfare system in London, which resulted in increased vulnerability and risk factors. The children had difficulty in maintaining contact with family and friends, and were removed from familiar places that played a part in their identities and feelings of security and belonging. As children get older, they begin to form attachments to other places. Feelings of belonging are often strongest for teenagers in their neighborhoods or other local areas (Jack, 2015).

Despite the increase in geographical mobility due to industrialization, modernization, and globalization, the importance of place in individuals' lives may have increased (Jack, 2015). This may be due in part to a need for security, belonging, and attachment in a world that is increasingly uncertain and with identities that are challenged by change. Having positive community attachment leads to feelings of security and belonging, particularly when individuals are linked to places where they were raised or where they currently live (Brehm, 2007). Even individuals who live in "inferior" environments can hold positive views of their community. Those who live in rural areas often have more positive views of their environments than individuals in more urban environments (Theodori, 2004).

Place plays a key role in the development of personal identity, and influences individuals' feelings of security and belonging (Brehm, 2007). This sense of belonging is especially important in today's culture where people are more likely to move away from their families of origin and are often less connected to their original communities. Questions related to identity (Who am I? Where do I belong?) are often closely related to questions about place (Where do I come from? Where do I live?) (Cross, 2003; Jack, 2015). When asked, "Tell me about yourself," participants from four countries (Great Britain, Ireland, France, and Spain) reported place as

an important part of their identities, more so than gender, occupation, and religion (Jack, 2015).

Place can have symbolic meanings for individuals, groups, and cultures, and is often influential in well-being (Choi et al., 2015). Special places such as memorials, and everyday places such as home, school, church, or neighborhood can all be influential. People do not merely live in a particular location, but often invest themselves in the places that play a role in their lives (Brehm et al., 2006). This can strengthen an individual's sense of self or collective identity, but also has negative implications when displacement occurs whether by force (e.g., act of nature) or because of life changes (e.g., new job, attending college). Leaving a place where one has formed attachments can influence a sense of belonging and stability (Mihaylov & Perkins, 2013). Detachment from place often disrupts an individual's sense of self until new attachments can be formed in an alternate location (Brehm, 2007; Choi et al., 2015; Cross, 2003).

In addition to physical place, the social environment in a particular place can have a profound influence on mental and emotional well-being (Choi, Reiter, & Theodori, 2015; Jack, 2015; Theodori, 2001). Literature supports this relationship between the positive influence of social ties on a sense of belonging and security in a community (Choi et al., 2015). This is true of both close social ties and looser social ties. Even loose social ties can help individuals to feel a greater sense of belonging and social support. Some research supports the inverse relationship between the social environment and crime or other negative behaviors (Farahani, 2016; Guo et al., 2018). Crime and other incivilities can then contribute to a further sense of insecurity and fear (Farahani, 2016; Guo et al., 2018).

Community satisfaction may be influenced by a wide range of ecological, objective, and subjective factors (Theodori, 2004). Williams et al. (1995a) report that length of residence, age, and income are positively related to measures of community

attachment and social ties within the community. Jack (2015) notes that environment has an influence on mental health in three ways: material, social, and symbolic. The material, or physical environment can be experienced as beneficial or detrimental to health because of natural elements such as water, mountains, forests, or even the structure and planning of buildings (Jack, 2015). There is some research to support that increased green space can have a positive influence on mental health, especially for those who are restricted to a particular area due to age, health issues, or role (e.g., older adults, mothers, etc.) (Jack, 2015). Additionally, having more access to outdoor space can reduce anxiety and anger, as well as improve concentration for some individuals (Jack, 2015).

Community attachment can be linked with positive physical and mental health outcomes and individual well-being (Choi et al., 2015; Farahani, 2016). Research has found measures of variance "relevant in understanding geographical and individual disparities in health," and further noted measures of association between neighborhood characteristics and health (Merlo et al., 2005, p.1022). Moreover, some research points to a relatively stronger relationship between community attachment and health in rural communities. Choi et al. (2015) found that while there was no significant difference on health ratings based on population size, respondents in smaller places self-reported better health. Respondents who had a higher level of community attachment and involvement also reported better health outcomes. Those with stronger feelings of community attachment reported fewer days of physical health interference (Choi et al., 2015). Similarly, those with higher levels of community attachment reported fewer days with mental health interference. The stronger the community attachment and the more involved an individual is with community organizations, the better respondents self-reported their health to be (Choi et al., 2015). Community attachment was also a significant predictor of improved mental health status and was associated with positive self-reporting of health and functional mental health status.

In the study by Choi et al. (2015), community involvement was associated with the functional status of physical health, while community attachment was associated more with emotional and sentimental feelings about the community. Further, community involvement was associated with a physical component, while community attachment was associated with the emotional component of individual functioning. The results of this study indicate that community attachment and involvement may interact with size of place (i.e., population density) to influence differential health outcomes (Choi et al., 2015). This is not to suggest that rural outcomes are better than urban, rather that community attachment may play a role in health.

Tourism is one of the main economic drivers in Pensacola (Haas Center, 2019). Because tourism often has a regional influence, looking at specific factors only in relation to a local area may not fully capture the impact of tourism on community and/or regional attachment in communities where tourism is a key component of a community (Williams, 1995a). Some research findings indicate that length of residence, when used as a proxy for community attachment, has an inverse relationship with perceptions of tourism. The greater the level of attachment, the less likely residents are to perceive tourism positively (Williams et al., 1995a). Cooperation of the local community is necessary for a successful tourism industry. Community attachment has not been found to be strongly associated with urbanism or rurality (Theodori, 2001).

METHODS

Measure

The community survey was developed by faculty members in the College of Education and Professional Studies (CEPS) at the University of West Florida to answer this research question: To what extent do Pensacola Ciclovia participants have a sense

of community attachment? The conceptual definition used to inform the development of items related to community attachment relates to individuals' feelings related to a sense of belonging to a community (Sadraddin et al., 2019). A positive sense of community attachment reflects positive feelings toward the community and a sense of belonging to that community (Sadraddin et al., 2019).

The piloted survey was designed to gain an understanding of what factors may attach residents to a community and consisted of 31 items, with nine questions exploring basic demographic information such as race, gender, age, education, income, employment, and marital status. There was one item in the survey on overall self-assessed health, wherein respondents were asked, "How is your overall health?" Possible multiple-choice answers were poor, fair, good, or excellent. This survey included specific items related to Pensacola including overall impression of the community as well as perceptions related to attachment, schools, arts and culture, public officials, parks and recreation, social offerings, and the economy/job opportunities. Additional items in the survey related specifically to the neighborhoods where participants reside. These survey items encompassed topics such as overall impression, schools, safety/police, and empowerment. The survey used a Likert scale format for each item where participants could choose between the following responses: strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree, or unsure.

Procedure

The university's Institutional Review Board approved this study. On March 25, 2017, several social work students and a faculty member set up a booth to administer surveys along the Ciclovia Pensacola route. The booth was located next to another booth that was giving away free bike helmets. Student volunteers completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Human Subjects training as well as a training by the authors on data collection protocols. Students were paired, with one student asking the questions and the other recording the answers. Students invited participants to complete the survey. Participants were given a small snack (trail mix, yogurt) after completing the survey.

Sample

This cross-sectional survey included a convenience sample of 47 individuals who attended the Ciclovia event. Unfortunately, it is unknown how many people attended Ciclovia overall. The only inclusion criteria for participation in the research was age; participants were required to be at least 18 years old. This inclusion criteria allowed for non-residents of Pensacola to respond. While non-residents might have limited knowledge of Pensacola, the greater Pensacola area includes many communities in which people commute into Pensacola for employment, entertainment, and shopping and could provide valuable data.

As seen in Table 1, participants' ages ranged between 18 and 74 years of age. The overwhelming majority of participants were Caucasian (89%). Almost 75% were female and 66% were married. Over 65% had at least a bachelor's degree and more than 53% had lived in their neighborhoods for five years or longer. Our demographic data differ from that of the census (2019). Notably, the sample was comprised entirely of Caucasian, Hispanic/ Latino, Asian, and multiracial participants, while census data indicate that African Americans comprise almost 29% of the population of Pensacola. Additionally, women comprise 52% of the Pensacola population, while women made up nearly 75% of our survey respondents.

RESULTS

Reliability Analysis of the Survey Measure

Reliability is important to assess in a new measure as it indicates the stability of scores across different situations. Internal consistency is an important measure of the reliability of a scale because it indicates the homogeneity of the items in a scale, and how

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Sample*

Variable	Level	# of Participants	% of Participants
Age	18-24	5	10.6
	25-34	5	10.6
	35-44	13	27.7
	45-54	7	14.9
	55-64	11	23.4
	65-74	6	12.8
Race	Asian	1	2.1
	Hispanic/Latino	3	6.4
	Multiracial	1	2.1
	White/Caucasian	42	89.4
Gender	Female	35	74.5
	Male	12	25.5
Marital Status	Married	31	66
	Widowed	2	4.3
	Divorced	6	12.8
	Never married	7	14.9
Number of Children	none	23	48.9
	1	9	19.1
	2	7	14.9
	3	4	8.5
	4	2	4.3
Level of Education	Less than high school	3	6.4
	Some College	9	19.1
	2 year degree	3	6.4
	4 year degree	19	40.4
	Master's degree	9	19.1
	Doctoral degree	3	6.4
Income Level	Less than $10,000	7	14.9
	$20,000-$29,999	3	6.4
	$30,000-$39,999	4	8.5
	$40,000-%49,999	5	10.6
	$50,000-$59,999	4	8.5
	$60,000-$69,999	3	6.4
	$70,000-$79,999	3	6.4
	$80,000-$89,999	2	4.3
	$90,000-$99,999	2	4.3
	$100,000-$149,999	6	12.8
	$150,000 or more	3	6.4

Employment Status	Full time	29	61.7
	Part time	6	12.8
	Unemployed and looking for work	1	2.1
	Unemployed and not looking for work	2	4.3
	Retired	3	6.4
	Student	6	12.8
	Disabled	1	2.1
Overall Health	Poor	1	2.1
	Fair	3	6.4
	Good	21	44.7
	Excellent	22	46.8
Type of Residence	Apartment	6	12.8
	Single detached house	40	85.1
	Other	1	2.1
Length of Time in Neighborhood	1 year	8	17
	2 years	7	14.9
	3 years	3	6.4
	4 years	4	8.5
	5 or more years	25	53.2

well individual items in the scale reflect the underlying latent construct, which in this case is community attachment (DeVellis, 1991; Spector, 1992). Coefficient alpha is the statistic most often reported to assess unidimensional internal consistency (Spector, 1992).

The internal consistency for each scale and respective subscale used in this study was assessed and resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .68, which is very close to the .70 that is usually considered acceptable for most purposes and indicates that the correlations are weakened very little by measurement error (Hatcher, 2013; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Findings Related to Community Attachment

Table 2 presents the proportion of participants ranking items on their perceptions of Pensacola. The *agree* and *strongly agree* categories were collapsed to indicate participant endorsement of an item.

Over 91% of participants had an overall favorable impression of Pensacola (see Table 2). Almost 71% had a favorable overall

impression of Pensacola public schools, although slightly fewer (68.1%) had a favorable overall impression of the University of West Florida. More than 63% felt welcomed in Pensacola, while slightly fewer than 54% felt connected to Pensacola. Exactly 66% concurred that there are many arts and cultural opportunities in Pensacola, whereas more than 70% indicated that there were many social offerings. Over 57% of participants believed that parks and recreational agencies provided many opportunities to residents. While almost 64% believe that Pensacola is economically thriving, only 36% thought that there are many job opportunities.

Table 3 presents the proportion of participants ranking perceptions of items related to the neighborhood where they live. The *agree* and *strongly agree* categories were collapsed to indicate participant endorsement of an item.

Just over 85% of participants had an overall favorable impression of the neighborhood where they live. Nearly 64% chose their neighborhood because of the school district. Almost 66% indicated feeling safe in their

Table 2. *Perceptions of Pensacola*

Response to Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
I have a favorable overall impression of Pensacola.	-	-	-	8.5%	29.8%	61.7%	-
I have a favorable overall impression of the public schools in Pensacola.	2.1%	-	-	12.8%	46.8%	23.4%	4.3%
I have a favorable overall impression of the University of West Florida.	-	6.4%	2.1%	6.4%	42.6%	25.5%	4.3%
There are many arts and cultural opportunities available in Pensacola.	-	-	2.1%	19.1%	38.3%	27.7%	4.3%
Pensacola parks and recreation agencies provide many opportunities to their residents.	-	4.3%	4.3%	17%	31.9%	25.5%	4.3%
I have a favorable overall impression of Pensacola's elected officials.	4.3%	-	4.3%	10.6%	31.9%	19.1%	14.9%
I feel connected to Pensacola.	4.3%	-	2.1%	12.8%	31.9%	23.4%	10.6%
Pensacola is economically thriving.	2.1%	2.1%	2.1%	19.1%	34%	29.8%	4.3%
There are many social offerings available in Pensacola.	-	2.1%	-	14.9%	42.6%	27.7%	6.4%
There are many job opportunities in Pensacola.	4.3%	8.5%	4.3%	21.3%	31.9%	4.3%	8.5%

Table 3. *Perceptions of Neighborhood*

Response to Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Unsure
I have a favorable overall impression of my neighborhood.	2.1%	2.1%	-	4.3%	31.9%	53.2%	-
An important reason I chose my neighborhood is because of the school district.	-	6.4%	2.1%	8.5%	44.7%	19.1%	4.3%
I feel safe in my neighborhood.	-	10.6%	-	4.3%	40.4%	25.5%	6.4%
I can make a difference in my neighborhood.	6.4%	8.5%	-	4.3%	31.9%	27.7%	2.1%
I have a favorable overall impression of the police presence in my neighborhood.	2.1%	12.8%	2.1%	6.4%	27.7%	36.2%	2.1%

neighborhoods, while nearly 64% had a favorable overall impression of their neighborhood. Approximately 60% believed they could make a difference in their neighborhood.

DISCUSSION

This research served as a pilot study set in the context of a larger community/ international event. Findings suggest that Pensacola-area residents who attended the event have a strong sense of community attachment. This sense of community attachment in our survey includes a favorable impression of opportunities in arts and culture, parks and recreation, schools, and economic vitality. Ciclovia offers an excellent opportunity for researchers to gauge the community attachment of an active sub-group of the local population, and thereafter examine how such attachments may manifest or differ by distinct neighborhoods across the city. Furthermore, data on community attachment can inform public officials making decisions about communities.

One important aspect to consider related to this pilot study was the opportunity for students to engage in the community and practice research-related skills. Students were provided training by both the IRB and researchers in how to conduct ethical research and how to engage with participants in order to collect data. This survey initiative provided a valuable experience for students in conducting research. Student survey assistants reported that they gained insight into the research process, as well as a new perspective of Ciclovia and community attachment.

There were several limitations in this pilot study. One limitation was the relatively low number of respondents, making the study ungeneralizable to the greater population. The number of participants and inclusion of only one measure of community attachment limited the amount of data analysis that could be completed as a part of this pilot study, and therefore limited the ability of the researchers to adequately test validity of this measure. While the measure appears to have good face

validity in that each of the items represents a measure of the conceptual definition of community attachment used for this study, because the community attachment survey did not include any other measures, the researchers were unable to assess construct validity.

Additionally, the survey demographics did not align with the broader demographics of the Pensacola area at large. In collecting survey data, locating the data collection booth next to the free helmet booth helped draw participants. There were often long lines for the free helmets and the survey team was able to interview individuals while they were waiting in line; however, this may have also drawn a unique respondent profile.

Future research should include residents' concerns for community resiliency, pace of community change on sense of place, and place-related behaviors. Inclusion of additional, standardized measures of community attachment would allow for a better assessment of validity of the pilot measure. Larger samples, more representative of the whole community may provide insight into areas for improvement in the community.

Future research utilizing a qualitative design may add richness and depth to the subject. Additionally, longitudinal analysis focusing on changes over time or before and after major events (i.e., hurricanes, pandemic, or violence within a community, etc.) would provide further data related to external influences on community attachment. Additional exploration related to changes in levels of community attachment and commitment in the aftermath of natural or man-made disasters is warranted. It is likely that there is a change in perception of community and commitment to community after these types of events when community members come together to address the needs of the community. More research is needed to explore the relationship between community attachment and the meaning of place and outcomes related to health, mental health, and well-being within local communities as well as other types of communities such as faith communities or communities created around a common cause.

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