

Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Prefigurative Politics"

Psychological Sense of Community as an Example of Prefiguration Among Occupy Protesters

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Abstract

This study examines psychological sense of community (PSOC) among participants in the Baltimore, Maryland and Washington, DC Occupy protests. The Occupy protests brought national attention to economic disparities in the United States. The movement was unique in its development of physical protest sites where participants developed communities, piloted direct democracy techniques, and tested out alternative ways of life. The current research examines 24 qualitative interviews using an integrative framework that draws upon sociology and community psychology concepts. This framework suggests that the Occupy movement created a protest space wherein participants experienced positive sense of community at the micro-level (the Occupy site), which often contrasted with their neutral or negative sense of community at the macro-level (the United States). Implications for the study of prefigurative politics are discussed. This research adds to extant literature in community psychology and prefigurative politics by systematically examining multi-level sense of community as an example of prefiguration within a social movement.

Keywords: Occupy, protest, prefigurative, politics, sense of community

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The Occupy Movement

The Occupy movement originated in Zuccotti Park in New York City and quickly spread across the United States and throughout the world. Occupy protestors staged major demonstrations and marches, and constructed tent communities in city centers across the country. The Occupy movement refused to affiliate with non-governmental organizations or political parties and resisted providing a unified list of demands. Instead, they engaged in nontraditional protest methods that highlighted economic inequality, and the only unified slogan provided by the movement was the statement, "We are the 99%."

The Occupy movement was frequently portrayed negatively in media, and many citizens and officials responded to the movement with confusion. However, the movement persisted in the face of considerable challenges. Many Occupy sites developed systems of governance and distributed food, medical supplies, and other resources to protest participants, creating "mini-societies" that were self-sustaining (Milkman, Luce, & Lewis, 2013). One by one, in the winter of 2011-2012, police disbanded Occupy camps. The Occupy movement continues to hold meetings, events, and demonstrations and in October 2012 provided major resources to victims of Hurricane Sandy in New York City (<http://occupysandy.net>). Additionally, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street, Rolling Jubilee, recently purchased \$30 million of student loan and consumer medical debt (<http://rollingjubilee.org>).

Occupy's unique qualities captured the interest of academics who have examined the movement's organizing strategies (Juris, 2012), use of direct democracy techniques and decentralized governance (Smucker, 2014), and emphasis on process rather than outcome as a social change strategy (Cornish, Montenegro, van Reisen, Zaka, & Sevitt, 2014). Explorations of prefiguration in the Occupy movement have most commonly noted the horizontal power structure and participatory democracy practices including 'mic checks' and general assemblies (see Gitlin, 2012; Leach, 2013).

However, scholars have also noted the role of sense of community in the occupations. Smucker (2014) observes the longing for community and connection as a common experience among Occupy Wall Street participants when he asks, "what if ... the thing we longed for the most was a sense of an integrated existence in a cohesive community?" (p. 3). Similarly, Dean (2014) argues that the Occupy movement enabled the United States to see itself as a "collectivity – we could say 'we' even as we argued over who we are and what we want" (p. 382). Gitlin (2013) points out that part of the Occupy identity included a "communal self" that was prefigurative in that "what it 'stood for' was the virtue of encampment itself, assembly as a way of life, a form of *being*" (p. 9, italics in original). Despite these observations that the experience of community was an important part of the Occupy movement, no study to date has focused specifically on sense of community within the Occupy protests. This paper attempts to address this gap in the literature by examining multi-level sense of community at the occupations.

Psychological Sense of Community

Psychological sense of community (PSOC) is a key concept in community psychology, commonly defined by four interrelated dimensions: membership, mutual influence, shared emotional connection, and integration and fulfillment of needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Membership includes a feeling of belonging to the group or community. Mutual influence means that an individual feels that they are both able to influence the community and also be impacted by their participation. Shared emotional connection refers to bonds developed through positive interactions over time. Integration and need fulfillment indicates that members feel that they benefit from the association they have with the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), these domains interact dynamically to create PSOC.

Psychological sense of community has been studied in different cultures across the world, and has been linked to a number of positive individual and group-level outcomes ranging from greater sense of subjective well-being (Davidson & Cotter, 1991), to more effective individual coping in the face of threat (Bachrach & Zautra, 1985), to community motivation for social change (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). In these and other studies, PSOC has often been measured as a unipolar construct and described in terms of its presence or absence. However, an argument has been made that PSOC can be effectively characterized as positive, negative or neutral (Brodsky, 1996) and that individuals can have different PSOC for the different communities they belong to (multiple PSOC).

Multiple PSOC

As the global landscape has expanded and research into PSOC has evolved, there has been increased focus on the fact that individuals belong to more than one community (Brodsky & Marx, 2001). The ecological models fundamental to community psychology are consistent with Hunter and Riger's (1986) characterization that individuals reside in a "series of nested communities" that "vary systematically in the functions they provide for their residents" (p. 65).

Brodsky (2009) explored multiple PSOC in her work with RAWA (The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), an underground women's organization in Afghanistan, and found that negative PSOC at a macro (societal) level may serve as a motivator to participate in a subcommunity (RAWA) with more positive PSOC. Findings suggested that the RAWA subcommunity offered its members an experience of positive micro-level PSOC while maintaining a social change agenda intended to influence the larger macro (societal) system in various ways. These findings are of particular relevance to the current study's examination of PSOC in the context of the Occupy protests.

PSOC in the Context of Protest

Individuals that gather to engage in protest are likely to experience many of the conditions for positive PSOC. Adopting a shared social identity, engaging a common threat, and the experience of protesting, likely contribute to the connection that protestors develop (Loomis, Dockett, & Brodsky, 2004; Obst & White, 2007). Empirical research supports the existence of a relationship between activism and PSOC, though the direction of that relationship is unclear (Omoto & Malsch, 2005; Omoto & Snyder, 2010). Although it is likely that individual personal resources have an impact on the degree to which one experiences a sense of cohesion (Levy, Itzhaky, Zanbar, & Schwartz, 2012), a number of researchers have described an overall sense of community at a protest site. For instance, Carrillo, Welsh, and Zaki (2015) provide a detailed description of the perceived PSOC among participants in the Egyptian revolution in 2011 that preceded the Occupy protests.

Prefigurative Politics

The phenomena in which protest groups embrace strategies and qualities that model those they want the larger society to adopt has come to be known as "prefigurative politics" (Leach, 2013). Breines (1989) highlighted this focus on enacting or "living" change when she studied efforts of the Students for a Democratic Society to create a "beloved community" that embodied the values of the community they wished to belong to and in this way "build the structure of a new and better social order within the shell of the old" (p. 48). Yates (2015) delineates three primary dynamics of prefiguration: means-ends equivalence, in which the processes of a movement reflect the desired outcomes; building alternatives, in which an alternative system is created in parallel to protest; and prolepsis, in which the alternative society is created in the present "as though it has already been achieved" (p. 4).

The concept of prefigurative politics has been associated with the Occupy protests most often in relation to participatory democracy and the consensus-based decision making process (see Leach, 2013). Scholars and activists continue to debate the utility of prefigurative politics as they seek to make meaning of recent global uprisings, including the Occupy movement (Smucker, 2014; van de Sande, 2013). The current study builds upon these studies by examining multi-level PSOC and its relationship to prefigurative action within the Occupy movement, primarily through the lens of Yates' "building alternatives" model.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 24 Occupy participants in November and December 2011. Interviews were conducted at the Occupy camps in Baltimore (McKeldin Square) and Washington, DC (Freedom Plaza and McPherson Square) and ranged in duration from ten minutes to one hour. Participants were eight women and sixteen men, selected based on availability and interest. Effort was made to invite individuals from every region of the occupation camp equally, as well as to obtain sample balance in gender and age of participants. In the Washington camps, certain areas were sectioned for communal use, and a greater proportion of participants were available in these areas.

Interview questions were based on a multiple sense of community framework, focusing on the primary domains of PSOC: membership, influence, needs fulfillment, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Informed consent and permission to audio record interviews were obtained verbally to protect participant confidentiality. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author and four undergraduate research assistants at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). Transcriptions were double-checked for accuracy once by research assistants and once by the author. Analyses were conducted in an iterative fashion, by noting patterns and themes, and relations among variables. Coding categories were derived from McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four domains of PSOC: membership, mutual influence, shared emotional connection and need fulfillment. In accordance with grounded theory methodology, as additional processes and domains emerged from the data, they were included in coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Early in coding, the contrast between PSOC at the Occupy level and PSOC at the national level emerged as a core phenomenon. As coding continued, the theme of prefiguration emerged and was added to each domain of PSOC and included in analyses. Through axial coding processes, a relationship between prefigurative politics and sense of community at the Occupy protests emerged. For this analysis, data coded into the four domains of PSOC were compared between levels (Occupy vs. United States) and analyzed for prefiguration.

Results

PSOC includes the four domains of membership, mutual influence, needs fulfillment, and shared emotional experience (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Participant responses to questions related to each of these domains are provided below, with the Occupy protests as the first referent community followed by the United States as the second referent community. Emerging themes that contrasted with or complicated the example of PSOC as an example of prefiguration are then addressed. Evidence of prefiguration is briefly discussed throughout and then summarized.

Membership

Within the psychological sense of community framework, membership includes boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging, personal investment, and a common symbol system (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Membership in Occupy

Individuals in the Occupy movement expressed that at Occupy there was a shared value of inclusion, and that this was fundamental to the purpose of the movement. One participant explained,

We can't kick people out, we don't have that authority, and kind of rightfully so. If we start excluding people ... like "Oh you're not part of this" well what the hell are we what are we doing here? – Joe¹, 27

Because the Occupy protests occurred in public spaces, the location and structure provided a highly inclusive definition of membership. That this inclusivity was both a feature of the space and reflective of the movement's values emerged frequently in the interviews.

Similarly, the principle and practice of inclusive membership emerged as a theme. Sometimes this meant highlighting the ways that individuals who might not be obviously expected to be included were.

There are definitely some people who are difficult to deal with. You know, like people who ... are treating us as a homeless shelter. People who are treating this as just another park to live in, and you know, smoke crack. Not necessarily people who are here for any Occupy reasons, and that can be difficult to deal with. But I believe that if we can't deal with these people, we have no point being here. – Jessica, 22

Membership in the United States

A variety of viewpoints emerged about participants' membership in the United States, many in contrast to the views of membership at Occupy. Some participants expressed feelings of disappointment, shame, or embarrassment, and a sense that there is inequity to membership in the US. When asked "How do you feel about being American?" one participant answered,

I feel embarrassed. I feel that for the strongest and one of the wealthiest countries in the world ... We're not taking care of our people. –Paul, 41

Disappointment or frustration with the US was sometimes combined with a strong personal investment in the proclaimed values of the US and a personal sense of responsibility for improving the climate of membership in the United States.

I feel like this is a really amazing, awesome country that has a lot of potential. We do a lot of shitty fucked up things, but there's a lot of potential. And I feel good about that. – Christopher, 29

In these ways, a more positive sense of membership within the Occupy movement contrasted with a less positive sense of membership within the United States. The intentional use of public space and including everyone – even those with agendas that might not be obviously aligned with the Occupy vision, suggest that experiences of membership at Occupy may have prefigured the experience of membership that participants were seeking in the United States – inclusive despite differences.

Influence

Influence operates bidirectionally such that the individual feels able to influence and also be influenced by the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Influence at Occupy

At the Occupy protests, many participants felt like they both had a say in what happened at the occupation and were impacted by the experience as well. The practice of participatory democracy, as operationalized in the General Assembly, was frequently described as a means of influence.

I have influence on things. I can go over there and put in a proposal in the GA [General Assembly] ... they listen to everybody. –Josie, 32

Participants frequently noted differences between the way they were influenced by their experiences at the Occupy camp and other experiences they have had. One participant explained,

An occupation is a different kind of protest that's not exactly even a protest. I don't think of it as a protest. It's about lifestyle. It's about culture because you are creating your community. ... You have to decide how to run a space collectively. So it's much more community building. It's much more impactful and you really internalize this sort of revolution by being here, by participating on a daily basis. It's not like you just go home ... and you know, watch TV or forget about everything. – Jessica, 22

This participant describes the ways she feels influenced by her experiences at Occupy, and contrasts that experience to other protests experiences she has had. Her emphasis on lifestyle and the community-building process over a more traditional type of protest suggests endorsement of a prefiguration in the building of an alternative community.

Influence in the United States

Participants expressed a common theme of feeling unable to influence the United States, often because financial interests (i.e., corporations) dominate the political decision making process.

No, I don't [feel like I have influence]. I've done a ton of different work on the outside and on the inside of the political machine and I don't ... No matter how much people power we have, no matter how much smart work we do within the institution, the way it is right now, I do not feel like I do on a national level. – Sarah, 35

However, participants often expressed a sense of efficacy to influence the United States through their participation in the Occupy movement. When asked if he felt that he had influence over what happened in the United States, one participant answered:

I do now. I didn't two months ago. – Mark, 42

Some participants indicated that their beliefs about freedom of speech and their decision to protest were a result of influence by United States values.

I think [being American] influences us to stand up for what we believe in more so than other countries. I feel like we have that revolutionary spirit and that patriotism instilled in us. – Kyle, 23

Themes that emerged in the domain of influence provide contrast between the Occupy subcommunity and the United States macrocommunity. Of additional note is the emergent theme of the right to protest, to "Occupy" as a means of reclaiming influence at the macro level, from which participants felt disenfranchised.

Need Fulfillment

Need fulfillment occurs when individuals experience benefits from membership in the group. Often members of a community share common values and join together to meet needs related these values. When their needs are met, they experience benefits from group membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The domain of need fulfillment resonates strongly with the overarching message of the Occupy movement, as the enduring slogan "We are the 99%" refers to the distribution of resources in the United States. In McMillan and Chavis' (1986) conceptualization, need fulfillment can include both psychological and material needs.

Need Fulfillment at Occupy

Occupy participants often described a feeling of safety created by the shared priority to take care of each other.

I've made friends here. They're not just friends, but they're family. And people that I really care about. And I care about ... the needs and the issues that other people have. – Christopher, 29

I get up with my neighbors every day, and we know each other, and we ask each other how we're doing, we're making sure each other's okay, we ask each other how the night's going, are your tents ok, are you weatherized, are you leaking, lets fix it ... that's what we do for each other. – Philip, 53

These quotes suggest that to these participants, need fulfillment at Occupy meant caring about each others' needs and helping them get met.

Need Fulfillment in the United States

In the context of need fulfillment in the greater US community, participants frequently noted that everyone's needs are not taken care of equally.

[Safety] depends what social class you're in. I feel like if you're privileged you are in the top one percent, you live in a very safe and peachy world versus those of us on the bottom, who are kept down here. We are subject to crime, disease, poverty, homelessness. – Kyle, 23

Another participant compared need fulfillment at the Occupation site to the ability of the larger United States social service system to meet the needs of citizens.

We have some older folks that are living here [at Occupy] instead of homeless shelters because they're being taking care of and it is a safer, and better and more caring environment. – Mark, 42

When asked about the benefits to being a part of the United States community, participants often described the benefits that they felt they did not have. For example, one Occupy participant described his experience with the most recent economic crisis.

I'm divorced, and that's still a touchy subject, because when the economy collapsed, ... everything was very tense, and I'm sure that my marriage was not the only one that imploded as the economy imploded ... Houses were lost, cars were gone, jobs didn't make any more money ... all I came up with was being a CNA [Certified Nurse Assistant] because it was the only job I could find that would pay, just under living wage. The thing about the other recessions, there was always a feeling that you could hang in there. It's gonna be ok. You don't have that feeling now. It doesn't look ok. I've looked at it for 7 years and it never looked ok, and there's no way out. That's why I'm here. – Philip, 53

This participant echoed the sentiments of many at the Occupy camps, who expressed feeling like their basic needs were not being met, had not been met for a long time, and did not seem likely to be met soon. For them, Occupy represented a last hope that something might change in the larger society and they might get their needs met.

Shared Emotional Connection

Shared emotional connection is cultivated through a number of group-level factors such as personal investment, resolving of community tasks, shared emotionally-valent events, as well as high quality interaction (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Shared Emotional Connection at Occupy

Occupy participants frequently referred to themselves as "a family" and described interpersonal connections that superseded individual differences.

A lot of people here normally wouldn't speak to each other. We'd probably see each other in the past and [think] "Oh! That guy is scary", "That guy is weird" ... but now that we've seen each other here, we have a bond now. We slept outside together. We've eaten cold mashed potatoes together. It's a different bond – more brotherly than anything. – Lawrence, 29

When discussing the absence of emotional connection in the United States, participants often mentioned corporate personhoodⁱⁱ and the valuing of profits over people.

We care and ... we are a family. We're here to let you know what a nation is supposed to look like. Not just some backstabbing, cutthroat, shut you down corporation. – Jim, early 20s

This participant indicates that the shared emotional connection, the feeling of "family" prefigures the change he would like to see in the larger society.

Shared Emotional Connection in the United States

Emotional connection was frequently described as lacking at the United States level. These statements were often paired with a denunciation of corporate power, which was viewed as creating emotional distance at the interpersonal level.

It's become this dog eat dog race. Everyone's out to elbow the other guy out of the way ... There's no compassion, no empathy any more. That's one of the things that I feel like the Occupy movement is trying to reinstall into Americans is the sense of compassion for one another, teamwork, you know, we are together for one common goal, so that we can all prosper. – Kyle, 23

Negative Cases and Complicating Subthemes

Although coding revealed themes of positive PSOC at the micro (Occupy) level that contrasted with more negative PSOC at the macro (United States) level, negative case examples emerged as well. These examples suggest that the relationship between PSOC and prefiguration is not simple, but nuanced and multidimensional. These cases were coded into subthemes of membership and influence, need fulfillment, and safety and diversity.

Membership and Influence

Some interviewees ($n = 3$) maintained that they did not consider themselves a part of the Occupy movement, despite their presence at the occupation site. These individuals articulated that they were not interested in membership because they had specific political issues they were protesting that they considered separate from the Occupy movement, because they disagreed with the methods used by the movement, or because they attended the protest to document the movement rather than participate. Not surprisingly, these individuals described experiences of influence that varied from the themes mentioned above. For example, one participant said,

I've definitely had a little bit of an impact. If I were to stay here more than these three days I would start to have a negative impact because I would be viewed as part of it and I don't want to anyone to think that I I'm am approving or endorsing anything that's going on here. – George, 60

Another indicated that he was uninterested in influencing the movement because he was only present to document it. In response to the question, "has your participation changed you in any way", he responded, "Nope. I was cynical then. I'm cynical now" (Paul, 41). These participants' experiences provide alternate views to those who expressed feelings of influence at Occupy that prefigured an experience of influence in the United States.

Several participants described a feeling of global membership that superseded sense of membership in the US. For example when asked if she considered herself American, one participant responded,

No, I am a human. I mean yeah, technically, yes. On paper, I am. But you know, I don't have any loyalty to America. – Serena, 20s

Statements such as this may signify a negative or neutral PSOC for membership in the United States, existing simultaneously with a stronger, perhaps positive, PSOC at the global level. The responses of these participants contrast with the themes described above, and suggest diversity in participants' experience of the membership and influence domains of PSOC at the occupations.

Need Fulfillment

Another theme that emerged is the sentiment expressed by some participants that, compared to many other countries, their needs are well-fulfilled in the United States.

I've never been starving. I've never spent longer than 3 or 4 days, maybe a week that I chose to do without access to fresh, clean water. I have a family who can pay for me to go to school. I've had an education; I've graduated high school and I've had access my entire life to libraries full of books. I've had years of a computer and access to the internet ... I've never had to work in a factory. I've never been sold into sex slavery, which isn't exclusively American, but living in the United States seriously cuts down on your risk for those things. – Deborah, 20

However, other participants acknowledged that these benefits were partly dependent on class.

A lot of the benefits that I have are due to the fact that I come from like a relatively privileged family ... I have had a lot of opportunities personally but not because I'm American. – Sarah, 35

Safety and Diversity

Of further note is the tension between PSOC domains of membership, emotional connection, and need fulfillment. By including everyone and trying to create a community based on equal input and participation, structural biases

from the macrosociety were highlighted. Participants often brought up issues of diversity and safety. However, most participants felt that different perspectives and interpersonal conflicts were handled well, or better than they expected.

Blending all kinds of cultures together that have different norms and behavior of interacting between different members of our community, ... we do run into those kinds of issues to deal with, but it's nothing that society in general doesn't deal with. It would be silly to think that we're not gonna have all the same problems that every other community in this city and in the country has. We are just more willing to actually not pretend like it's not there, that's the difference. We make a bigger deal of problems that than you would in another environment where you might say, 'Well, that's just what you have to deal with.' – Mark, 42

I would expect with people from all these different sort of cultural backgrounds and socio-economic backgrounds, that you'd have a lot more tension than you do. But obviously, there's gonna be some. – Jessica, 22

Other participants mentioned concerns about safety. One participant initiated and led an anti-oppression group at the camp in order to increase her safety at the camp.

I had been harassed on the space a couple times and I was really pissed about kind of a lack of response in general. People were just wanting to ignore it and jump ahead into action – "let's end economic inequality..." Once the anti-oppression group starting going ... I feel more backed up if and when I do have to challenge harassment. It's a difficult process and I think it's going to be. – Sarah, 35

This participant also speaks to the tension between strategic politics (jumping ahead to end income inequality) and prefigurative politics (the difficult process).

Other participants spoke about segregation at the occupation, by age, race, and other factors, as well as by agenda.

We tolerate each other. For the most part, you got the young kids which I guess I am a part of. We like to goof off. You got the older, cooler people like them. They're pretty cool. And then you got just the kooks ... just don't even talk to them ... I wouldn't. – Jim, early 20s

Even in this Occupy camp, you can tell there's clearly a subconscious segregation, but until groups really love themselves, you can't love anyone else. I mean hell. Blacks is killing Black people and White people are getting high, and you know, Spanish people getting drunk and shit. – Ron, 41

Summary of Complicating Themes

Although the current analysis suggests that many participants at the Occupy protests experienced positive PSOC at the occupation which contrasted with their more negative PSOC in the United States, there were exceptions. Some individuals did not want to have membership or influence. Others acknowledged that the United States provides for their needs in some ways that other countries do not. Many drew attention to the difficulties associated with building community and consensus among an extremely diverse group of people. This challenge may have been exacerbated because at the time of interviews, camps were being broken up by the police and participants from other cities traveled to Washington, DC, increasing the diversity on a daily basis. Many of those who had

issues with safety and conflict acknowledged that the conflicts that arose were no greater than those in the macro-community and some took part in proactive action to increase safety and de-escalate conflict.

Prefigurative Action

Results suggest that the positive PSOC experienced at the microlevel (Occupy) often was indirectly or directly contrasted to less positive PSOC at the macrolevel (United States), indicating that PSOC may be an example of prefiguration within the Occupy movement. For each of the domains of PSOC, participants in the Occupy movement suggested the experience they had at Occupy was different from their experience in the larger United States community in ways that emulated the change they would like to see in the larger society. The evidence of prefiguration for each of the domains of PSOC is outlined below.

Membership

For the domain of membership, many participants described membership in the United States negatively. Some indicated that they feel embarrassed or ashamed of their membership in the United States because of the unequal distribution of wealth. Others indicated that they support the stated values of the United States, but feel disappointed in the execution of those values. Still others expressed a greater identification with humanity as a whole than with the United States specifically. In contrast, themes emerged suggesting that everyone was welcome at Occupy despite differences in agendas, resources, or professions. There was division and conflict within this inclusivity, and it was clear that Occupy was not a panacea that erased all the negative aspects of membership experienced at the US level. Overall, however, many participants expressed appreciation for diversity and support for the process by which disputes were solved, even when the solution was segregation. By striving for inclusion and equality within the Occupy movement, the experience of membership prefigured the experience participants would like to experience in the larger society.

Influence

For the domain of mutual influence, participant views about influencing and being influenced by the referent community at times diverged. Each is reviewed below in turn.

Participants in this study often indicated that they did not feel that they had influence over what happened in the United States. Many argued that traditional avenues of influence such as voting, talking with their congressperson, or working within the system for change were not effective. In contrast, many participants indicated that they felt that they had influence at Occupy through participation in the General Assembly, or by helping to create the community. Another viewpoint that was frequently expressed was that the Occupy movement was a means to influence the larger United States community. The direct democracy by which the Occupy movement made decisions is one of the more frequently recognized examples of prefiguration in this movement (see [Gitlin, 2013](#)). Of additional note is that by participating in the movement, individuals felt able to influence the Occupy community and the course it took, whereas in the larger United States system they felt that they had little ability to influence much at all.

Many participants expressed feeling influenced by the values of the United States – in particular, by "American" values of standing up for their beliefs and expressing dissent. In contrast, individuals described feeling that Occupy influenced them through helping them feel connected to community. Many participants indicated that their perceived lack of influence as an individual, combined with values they gained from being influenced by U.S. culture, drove

their initial decision to participate in Occupy. However, once they arrived, they determined that participating in Occupy was a way to increase their influence on the United States. These interviews suggest that Occupy participants wanted to influence and be influenced by each other and they created that experience at the Occupy encampments. It is notable that, for the domain of influence, prefiguration may have organically emerged rather than been an intentional part of the Occupy structure. These results suggest that, at least in some ways, participants gradually grew to feel that they were able to influence and be influenced by the micro (Occupy) community, in a way they wish they could influence the macro (United States) community.

Need Fulfillment

One of the primary themes of the Occupy movement was need fulfillment. The slogan "We are the 99%" specifically referred to unequal distribution of resources in the United States. Participants in this study often expressed that the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States meant that needs are unequally met. They described the sense that safety, connection, shelter, and mental health care are available only to those who can afford them in the United States, whereas in the microcommunity, they described sharing food and shelter with their neighbors, and creating safety and connection deliberately. The domain of need fulfillment interacts with the domain of membership, as the Occupy movement focused so clearly on equality and inclusion. In these domains, themes emerge indicating that at Occupy, participants developed the type of community that they wished the larger United States community would adopt – one of equal resource distribution and the provision of basic resources for all.

Shared Emotional Connection

When discussing shared emotional connection in the United States, many participants felt that the United States did not value emotional connection and was insensitive to the suffering of its citizens. Often this was related to consumerism and corporate ethics. In contrast, participants described the Occupy community as "family", and talked about salient shared experiences and connecting with people who they would not have connected with in the larger United States community. The interviews suggest that building the Occupy community imbued individuals with a sense of teamwork and connection that they did not have elsewhere in their lives. It is likely that the task of creating a communal camp in the middle of an urban center in late autumn heightened this sense of connection, if simply for survival. However, participants frequently spoke of openness to emotional experience and a value of connecting that was cultivated at the occupation and was an example of prefiguration, as it reflected the United States they would like to see.

Evidence of prefiguration emerged in varying degrees and forms in each of the domains of PSOC. Sometimes participants directly alluded to prefiguration when comparing the experience at Occupy with their experience in the United States, paraphrasing the 1940s adage "build a new society within the shell of the old." At other times, the focus on process and lived experience emerged more subtly. One participant captured more explicitly her hope that this newly built society would become the greater society when she stated,

What do I hope to get out of this experience? I hope to not to get out of this experience. I hope it keeps on going, I hope it keeps on growing, I hope to be a part of that growth. – Deborah, 20

This statement exemplifies one type of prefiguration as described by Yates (2015), in which the protest community hopes to eventually subsume the macrocommunity.

Discussion

This study examined PSOC at the microlevel (Occupy) and the macrolevel (the United States), and found evidence of prefiguration. Themes that emerged when examining responses to questions about PSOC at Occupy and the United States suggested that participants at Occupy created the sense of community at the camps that they wished they felt in the United States.

Many media outlets and citizens responded to the Occupy movement with confusion or disdain, and it has been described as a failure (Roberts, 2012). This paper attempts to give voice to the participants in the Occupy movement. By examining and sharing their words, it is the author's hope that the movement can be seen in a new light, by new eyes, and participants' experiences can be honored and valued.

Extant research has noted but not thoroughly examined the role of sense of community at the Occupy protests. The current research explores the possibility that PSOC may operate prefiguratively in this context. Additional research is needed to examine other ways that PSOC may influence or be influenced by participants in a political protest setting as well as the ways that PSOC may contribute to the longevity or success of the movement. For example if, as is suggested in some domains, participants were not aware that PSOC was possible or important to them at the macro (United States) level until they experienced it at the micro (protest) level, it is possible that this type of prefiguration can help people identify, clarify, and instill hope in their own political values. More research is needed to better understand the dynamic nature of PSOC as a prefigurative action.

Similarly, Schneider (2012) reports that one tangible outcome of the occupation was the strengthening of networks of activists who continue to work together to plan social change efforts. Positive PSOC in the Occupy community may have helped to facilitate the building of these relationships and enabled them to persist after the evictions. It is also possible that an experience of positive PSOC at Occupy inspired participants to seek or create communities with positive PSOC after the camps disbanded. Additional research examining PSOC among the organizational offshoots of Occupy (and among other communities to which participants in Occupy belong) would help to better understand the effects of PSOC as a prefigurative action. Continued research is needed to assess whether and how this type of prefigurative action can effect social change.

Despite clear overlap between the values of community psychology (prevention, social justice, diversity, empowerment) and the processes of prefigurative politics, community psychology has yet to fully explore the value of this partnership. Previous research has urged community psychology to revitalize a balanced focus on process as well as outcome (Cornish et al., 2014). This paper responds to this call to action, and further suggests that community psychology consider the possibility that prefiguration may be occurring in the communities in which we work. Living the action of prefiguration is a part of many people's lives already, whether or not it is identified explicitly as such – through the local food movement (Kleiman, 2009), activist communities (Siltanen, Klodawsky, & Andrew, 2015), or music festivals with a political cause (Sharpe, 2008). Community psychology, because of the focus on interactions between individuals and their contexts, is in a unique position to examine the impact of prefiguration. More research is needed to examine instances of PSOC and other community psychology concepts operating prefiguratively in local communities, and the impact of this on individuals, groups, and the larger society.

This paper also contributes to the literature on prefigurative politics. Many authors have recognized that sense of community may be important to prefiguration, but this paper is the first to explore this in a systematic way. Results

provide an example of how the specific domains of PSOC: membership, influence, need fulfillment, and shared emotional connection, can clarify and demonstrate evidence of prefiguration, as well as elucidate the complicated nature of individuals' relationships to a movement and a protest community. Further, the current research suggests that some elements of a movement may not be intentionally prefigurative but that prefiguration can emerge naturally from the actions and interactions of the individuals involved. Future research could help delineate between PSOC emerging naturally as a part of a protest community and when it is a deliberate prefigurative action.

Breines (1989) argues that whether or not a protest movement embraces strategic politics, creating – even for a short time – the community you want to have, is a success in itself and a meaningful social change. Young and Schwartz (2012) draw on the work of John Holloway's book *Crack Capitalism* to describe systematic strategies for a movement of prefigurative processes in which a multitude of "cracks" (interstitial movements that subvert the norm) in the system lead to a revolution (Holloway, 2010). These results argue that the Occupy movement may have created such a "crack" by providing a protest space wherein participants experienced positive PSOC at the micro-level (the Occupy site), which contrasted with their neutral or negative PSOC at the macro-level (the United States). The trajectory of this crack and what it means about the growth of PSOC and the Occupy movement are research areas ripe for exploration.

Notes

i) All participants' names are pseudonyms.

ii) Corporate personhood refers to the Supreme Court decision that provided some of the same rights of individuals to corporations. See Supreme Court case *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission* (2010).

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