The Relationship Between Community Involvement, Attachment and Trust and Perceived Satisfaction Levels of Local Government Service Delivery

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Abstract

This paper presents the details of a study examining three measures of community social capital and their effect on residents' levels of perceived satisfaction with service delivery by a regional local government authority. The results indicate that residents with stronger involvement in the local community have significantly lower perceived satisfaction scores than those who have less community involvement. The findings are a challenge to local governments who are seeking to improve service delivery satisfaction. The implications for local government authorities, especially those seeking to create greater community involvement, are discussed.

Introduction

Governments at national, state and local levels in Australia have come to recognise the importance of social factors in the fabric of a community. As a result, each state has included social elements in their current long-term plans and many local councils are following suit. Social considerations now form part of the triple bottom line for government economic, environmental and social planning.

Consideration of social elements has developed from the notion that a strong social base will lead to a stronger and healthier community, also referred to as social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). The sense of association that is felt by people towards a community with which they are involved has been the focus of much research under a range of subject headings such as social capital, community orientation, community satisfaction, community attachment, social involvement and wellbeing (Barrows, 1998; Proenca, Rosko & Zinn, 2000; Scull, 2001; ABS, 2002).

Recent research by Filkins, Allen and Cordes (2000) highlights the importance of social ties in predicting community satisfaction. While the development of a framework for social capital includes the element of trust (Putnam, 1993), the relationship between trust and community satisfaction is less clear. Further, it has been suggested that

subjective measures of performance should be included in measures of community satisfaction and quality of life (Sirgy *et al.*, 2000). While participation in a community has been found to be a key dimension in organisational commitment and satisfaction (Meyer & Allen, 1991), little research has been carried out on the effect of attachment, involvement and trust in the area of local government service delivery and their effect on satisfaction. Hence, the purpose of this article is to report on a study which investigates the relationship between these elements of social capital - attachment, involvement and trust - and satisfaction with local government service delivery.

This article firstly reviews literature related to local government community satisfaction as well as community attachment, trust and community involvement as the latter three constructs are expected to affect community satisfaction with service delivery. The paper then outlines details of a self-administered postal survey undertaken in October 2005 which collected data on local government performance and community views. The results section presents the findings from a regression analysis which examined the relationship between the three independent variables and community satisfaction with service delivery. In the final section, the findings are discussed and conclusions are presented.

Community Satisfaction

Community satisfaction has been examined in relation to a range of effects, such as migration intentions (Vogt, Allen & Cordes, 2001), and has been the subject of numerous surveys by town and city councils in Australia (e.g., Lismore City Council, Port Phillip Council, Hornsby Shire and Gladstone). It has also been surveyed by medical and police services (e.g., Hulka *et al.*, 1975; Nyhan & Martin, 1999; Proenca *et al.*, 2000; Kuisma *et al.*, 2003). A number of the researchers have examined the factors that affect community satisfaction. Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976), for example, identified nine community attributes affecting levels of community satisfaction while Bardo and Dokmeci (1990) and Hughey and Bardo (1987) identified four factors: friendliness, care by the community, belongingness, quality of community life and alienation/acceptance.

Social dimensions were considered by Goudy (1977) who identified primary group relationships, community participation, commitment, viability, heterogeneity, power distribution and community pride as affecting varying levels of community attachment, community as a place to live and evaluation of the community. Social dimensions were found to have a greater effect on community evaluations than evaluations of government services, consumer services and education. Filkins, Allen and Cordes' (2000) findings provide support for both Goudy (1977) and Brown's (1993) research and confirm that both social dimensions and satisfaction with employment are important predictors of community satisfaction. Puddifoot (1995) determined social dimensions, in the form of family ties, and the length of time people had lived in an area were important in terms of the way they identified with a local town. These findings support the notion that it is more than the delivery of physical services that lead to people's satisfaction with the place in which they live.

Community Attachment

A large body of research literature is associated with community attachment, which has been examined by writers such as Buttel, Martinson and Wilkening (1979), Um and Crompton (1987), McCool and Martin (1994), Williams *et al.* (1995), Ritzer (1996) and Jurowski (1998). In these studies, the relationship between community attachment and some perceived consequential effects such as social and economic effects or tourism development have been explored.

Much of the research into community attachment has been carried out in sociological studies and has focussed on the determination of the presence or absence of a 'community feeling' and the drivers of feelings such as geographical location, educational experience, friendliness within the community and length of residency. In attachment studies, attachment has often been measured by the length of time that the respondents have spent in a particular area or region; however, more subjective measures of attachment have recently been suggested (Cross, 2004).

Trust

Trust is considered an important element of social capital (Putnam, 1993; Scull 2001). Trust enables interactions to exist in a society, assists with social cooperation and helps to provide local solutions to collective problems. People will not develop strong networks or form groups if trust is not established. Likewise, the concept of helping others and returning favours or reciprocity is also dependent on trust where a neighbour helping another will have the favour returned in some way in a time of need. Within smaller communities where people operate in informal groups, such as groups of neighbours or friends and informal interest groups, trust is important as rules of behaviour are not as clearly defined when compared to more formal groups such as religious groups, sports clubs, unions or community groups.

Of concern, however, is that there has been a decline in public trust in government that is associated with a distancing between the community and government organisations (Putnam, 2000; Welch, Hinnant & Moon, 2004). Of relevance to local government is whether a breakdown in trust in the community leads to lower satisfaction with local government performance. A search of the literature did not identify any studies examining the effect of trust on local government satisfaction ratings.

Community Involvement

Community involvement is the level of activity an individual contributes to their local community. It plays an important part in communities as being involved in activities, particularly on a voluntary basis, indicates a level of pride in and commitment to the community. In addition, a large number of people are involved in community activities in Australia. Such involvement can range from helping at the local school canteen or sports club through to formal participation in local government. Yet little is known about the relationship between community involvement and community satisfaction. As councils have to deal with increasingly complex and difficult community problems, seeking the

support of members of the community to assist in providing solutions and assistance may be seen as an option for councils. In this study the argument that a person's involvement assisting in a community matter will lead to greater community satisfaction because the act makes them feel like they are part of the solution and provides them with a sense of achievement is examined.

The Study

Local communities offer an opportunity for the examination of the relationships between social capital indicators such as community involvement, attachment and trust and satisfaction. This study, therefore, investigates whether a person's level of social involvement influences their perceptions of satisfaction with local government service delivery. It was hypothesised that members of a community who feel a strong sense of community involvement, attachment and trust would also feel more satisfied with the overall nature of the service delivery by their local government.

Respondents were obtained by using a single stage sampling process of residents in a Northern NSW local government area. The total population of the area was about 43,000. Three thousand questionnaires were mailed to residents in October 2005 and after taking into account returns and blank responses, 502 useable responses were obtained for an effective response rate of 19.2 percent. Sample selection was by way of a random sample selection of households. Control was maintained for rural and urban residents based on the breakdown of urban/rural rateable properties in the local government area.

The only control maintained over who responded was through the instructions provided, which requested that the person next in line for a birthday completed the survey. It would appear from the results that this method led to the number of female respondents being slightly higher than the number of male respondents. There was also a skew towards older respondents, particularly among the males. The sample did, however, provide reasonable coverage of overall males and females and across all the age groups. The sample was also split based on geographic populations with proportions of 65 percent for urban and 35 percent for the rural areas being used for sample stratification. The respondent sample roughly matched these proportions being 68.8 percent and 31.2 percent for the urban and rural areas respectively.

The questionnaire collected information from respondents on their satisfaction with various aspects of services provided by the local government. Their opinions in regard to a number of statements about their attitudes towards their community as well as details of demographic characteristics were also sought.

To check for any differences between the sample and the population, a sub-sample of the survey sample was randomly selected based on the population age proportions. The sub-sample size was 205. A comparison was made for the first question containing 12 parts. Responses between the two samples were compared using a z test for differences. All the results were not significant at the 95 percent confidence level (power = 0.8). This indicates that the survey responses were not statistically different from those of the population, thus providing confidence that the results were representative of the population of the local government area.

It was hypothesised that community involvement, attachment and trust would have a significant positive effect on satisfaction. The three independent variables were measured using a five-point Likert type scale with anchor points of strongly agree and strongly disagree. Attachment was measured using five questions covering levels of belonging, area promotion and discussion, intention to remain and ownership of local challenges. Three items relating to the perceived level of community friendliness, trust and support were used as measures of trust. To measure community involvement, a seven-item scale was used which included statements related to involvement with communities and their activities, willingness to help others and perceptions about community-mindedness. Checks of the scales confirmed that each had good reliability with Cronbach's alpha values of .86, .87 and .79 for involvement, attachment and trust respectively. Satisfaction with service delivery was measured by a single question using a five-point scale with anchor points of *very dissatisfied* to *very satisfied*. Composite variable measures were reduced to single item measures by using weighted composite scores.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis used to determine whether a linear relationship existed between satisfaction with service delivery and the single item scores for the three composite variables of involvement, attachment and trust.

Table 1: Model Estimation for Overall Satisfaction with Council Service Delivery

Factor	Standardised Coefficient (beta)	t-value	Significance
Attachment	.264	4.788	0.000
Involvement	-.138	-2.792	0.005
Trust	.164	3.033	0.003

Source: Original table. Notes: Adjusted R^2=0.119, F-significance = .000, n = 398.

All variables were significant at the .01 level or better. The F-value was significant at the .000 level, which showed that there was strong evidence to support the view that the overall model was significant and that the independent variables were related to overall satisfaction with the council service delivery.

The adjusted R-squared value indicated that 11.9 percent of the variation in satisfaction was explained by the variation in attachment, involvement and trust. Of particular note, however, was the direction of the variables examined as indicated by the standardised coefficients in Table 1 and presented visually in Figure 1.

The findings indicate that the measures for trust and attachment had a positive relationship with overall satisfaction with the council service delivery. That is, as trust and attachment increased so too did satisfaction with council service delivery. The reverse was apparent for community involvement where greater levels of perceived community involvement led to lower levels of overall satisfaction with council service delivery.

These findings suggest that a respondent orientation bias exists whereby people who promote an area to other people or who like and trust local people are positively biased in

their satisfaction responses. Of concern, however, was the finding that a proportion of community-minded respondents had a negative bias in their responses.

Figure 1: Relationship of Trust, Community Involvement and Attachment to Overall Satisfaction with Council Service Delivery
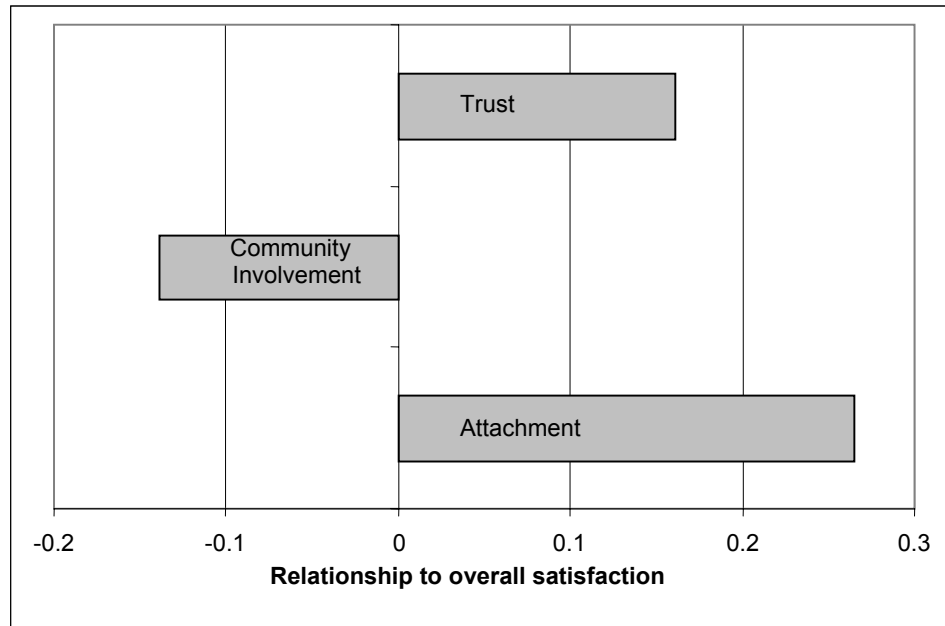
Source: Original figure.

Discussion

The findings reported here provide evidence that trust and attachment lead to higher levels of overall satisfaction with service delivery. Contrary to expectations, however, it was found that higher perceived levels of community involvement led to lower levels of satisfaction with service delivery.

These findings have implications for councils in the light of a move by governments in Australia to develop greater community involvement and participation in local areas. It is unclear as to the reasons why higher community involvement leads to lower satisfaction scores; therefore, a greater understanding of this issue is needed. It can be speculated that greater involvement in the community leads to greater frustration with the lack of resources and support for those providing the support, and some of this frustration may be directed at local councils. Alternatively, it may be that it is the disgruntled people in a community who are becoming involved in community activities in order to create change and improve facilities in the community. That is, they have been forced into action because of a perceived need or are responding to a call from the community.

In relation to trust, the positive association indicates that stronger community trust leads to greater satisfaction levels. The findings highlight the importance of local governments ensuring that strong levels of trust exist in their communities. In a climate of decreasing trust, particularly toward government (Welch *et al.*, 2004), strengthening social relationships is becoming increasingly important.

The message for local government is that there is a need to listen to and communicate positively with those involved with helping in the community. This could extend to providing greater recognition of those employed in the community or working as volunteers and go beyond the traditional formal community groups and organisations to include informal groups or activities. In order to develop greater trust and attachment (pride) in communities, local councils could develop strategies to communicate these messages and encourage the sharing of stories and events to facilitate these messages. For instance, councils could encourage the welcoming of newcomers into a community. An example of this can be seen in some communities that host annual street BBQs where neighbours get together to socialise in an informal atmosphere.

Further research is necessary to examine the way social factors affect perceptions of satisfaction with service delivery by local councils. Such research should be extended to other geographic areas in an effort to achieve greater understanding of the relationship between community social capital and community satisfaction.

Conclusions

The results of this research indicate that the level of involvement, attachment and trust perceived by residents of a local council area did have an influence on their perceptions of satisfaction with local government service delivery. Of note was the finding that community-minded residents were not as satisfied with local government service delivery as their less community-minded counterparts. This could possibly be due to frustration by community-minded counterparts with the lack of resources available to assist with their community activities. This would suggest that local governments need to pay attention to community-minded resident groups as they are prone to promote greater community involvement and communicate their appreciation to the broader community. On the other hand, the results for attachment and trust were positively associated with satisfaction. The findings indicate that people living in the area longer and those trusting of others in the community were more satisfied with the local government service delivery than those who were strongly community-minded. It could be that the attached and trusting residents were basing their satisfaction judgements on historical events and were in fact glossing over community issues and problems that did not affect them directly.

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