

Fostering Local Sustainability Through Events Celebrating Diversity

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Abstract

The issue of urging powerful corporations and governments to mitigate climate change is a monumental challenge. However, another route to mitigation is the motivation of community members to contribute to their local natural environment. In recent years as the United States has been ideologically divided, I am interested in doing exploratory research on how the presence of diversity in a community can help motivate an individual to care for their community's land and species. This research study will specifically assess the effect of a wide assortment of community events and their content on fostering diversity in a community and thus how they might provoke environmental sustainability. Existing research examines the strong direct relationship between a sense of diversity in a location and a sense of community in that same location. This new study would consist of qualitative field research conducted at a wide variety of community events. I would first answer a set of uniform questions about the nature of each event. Then, interviews would assess how much the attendees of each event feel the event promotes diversity, and also how much the event makes them feel inclined to care for their community's environment. Interactions with people already caring for their environment—perhaps through gardens or energy saving programs—would assess how much they feel diversity is present and celebrated in their community, and what kinds of events they attend. After collecting this information, the study would compare each event and interview response and notice if any variables strongly show what kind of content at an event is most effective at promoting diversity, and if those events were then successful in encouraging individuals to care for their environment. The study would conclude with recommendations for town members and leaders for how to foster a community inclination to protect and care for their land and species, by hosting the kinds of events whose content promotes this inclination.

Fostering Local Sustainability Through Events Celebrating Diversity

The intersection of diversity and environmental sustainability occurs in the discussion of community. A sense of belonging to a community is powerful, and this research explores just how powerful members of a community can be when they feel motivated to protect the place in which they live. Individuals can accomplish incredible tasks when joining together in local spaces and sharing ideas. A grassroots approach to major societal issues can be immensely powerful, and sometimes these movements can even prove to be more powerful than the actions of governmental authorities or of large and wealthy corporations. I am interested in how community members might be motivated to join together in combating the societal issue of climate change.

Uniquely, I am interested in exploring through this study what kind of content at community events might be most powerful in motivating community members to join environmental sustainability movements. Specifically, I want to hone in on one aspect of community events which has been found to foster a sense of community belonging among individual members: diversity. Existing research shows that community events are effective tools at promoting diversity. This study would explore what content at those events may be most productive in doing so.

In conducting this research, I would be able to conclude with suggestions for community members and leaders on what kinds of events they should plan and allocate energy and funds towards in the pursuit of generating an environmentally sustainable community. If more communities can adopt these events as motivating tactics, then they may collectively be able to transform society and urban life into a more influential force in the fight against climate change.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the term “community” will be defined as a collection of people living physically in the same area. A community is also a symbolic concept meaning a group that has found a sense of comradery among shared interests or goals. This study keeps that definition, and discusses it in conjunction with the criteria of physical location.

The term “diversity” will be used broadly in this study, to describe differences in culture coming together in a place. The word could refer to diversity of ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, economic background, physical ability, or other characteristics that may differ among individuals of a group. All are important and useful to be discussed in this study, as the study is exploratory. The research conducted as part of the study will assess which diverse features the event goers may value most, and any patterns will be noted in results and conclusions.

The term “sustainable development” is defined by the Brundtland Commission’s *Our Common Future* as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (1987). While “social sustainability” in particular often involves more than just the aforementioned definition—from community aspects ranging from walkability to education—this study focuses on drawing connections between the events studied and how they lead to resiliency from an environmental perspective. Specifically, a community can provide for future generations environmentally by taking actions to contribute to the fight against global climate change. Small actions can lead to a cumulative positive impact, and the choices and actions that community members and leaders can make range from tending to local gardens, to preserving natural areas of plants and wildlife, to reducing pollution and becoming more efficient with waste management. By focusing on diversity in an area and connecting it to environmental sustainability, I am representing the complexities of climate change by describing it as an intersectional issue.

Literature Review

The progression of diversity inclusion fostering community, and therefore fostering environmental resilience in a location, is explored in depth through several routes. However, the topic is indeed most logically described as a progression, and the research reflects these steps. Only after one has formed a sense of individual belonging can they conceptualize the possibilities for the group of which they are a part. Then, motivation through attachment to a place emotionally, or motivation through a duty to contribute to one's habitat, can occur. Roles of the individual are discussed in existing research, as well as roles of governmental leaders, in this pursuit. Through a thorough perusal of existing literature, I conclude that this study can further provide an exploratory evaluation of what specific kinds of community events can help work towards the goal of celebrating diversity, in order to achieve a strong community need to protect an environment.

It has been found that fostering a sense of community occurs through celebration of diversity, and teaching of inclusion at a young age. By their very nature, cultural differences are the antithesis of cultural monotony. Therefore, the celebration of cultural differences has the ability to break up cultural monotony. An article by Stevenson finds this is a helpful discovery because too much cultural monotony leads to "unproductive conventions" (2021). Conversely, then, a peaceful coexistence of cultural differences must lead to *productive* societal conventions in a place—perhaps a move towards resiliency, or an increase in quality of life or well-being for its residents. Stevenson in particular focuses on the aspects of "community-led, non-for-profit, social events" (2021). While the researcher does this to exclude events which have the intention of attracting out-of-town audiences, and therefore effectively focuses on social rather than economic impacts of these events, my intention is to focus on the content of these gatherings

rather than their planning processes and economic goals. For example, if a music festival that benefits the town economically and attracts out-of-town patrons also has an impact on promoting diversity within the town, then it is of interest to my study.

Research has also been done to discover more about how to foster social inclusion by studying children, who are learning social conventions for the first time. Johansson and Rosell discuss their finding that fostering community at a young age--between ages 3 and 5--leads to greater social inclusion behaviors with growth (2021). While Johansson and Rosell consider daycare and kindergarten as places for children to learn these behaviors, they do not offer comments on where else children may gain these experiences outside the home.

Social research has also explored the idea of fostering one's sense of self, to develop an intrapersonal confidence, and how it may be related to an individual then contributing to the community. Allowing members of a community to develop their own sense of self by providing activities that celebrate unique identities make them feel more motivated to contribute to their community (Raco 2007). Also, an emphasis on multiculturalism is becoming increasingly rooted into the practices and education in the fields of counseling and psychology (Miller et al. 2014). Psychologists are learning about cultural diversity as a tool to help them understand individuals and their emotions. Again, these were productive studies to give context to how an individual is motivated to care for their environment, and I am interested in what kind of content in these activities successfully promotes multiculturalism and sense of self for these individuals.

Next--to draw a connection between diversity and environmental sustainability--when a sense of community is fostered, people collectively learn how to take care of the natural resources in their environment more responsibly and effectively. Actually, there is research that finds that in a community which relies on the wills of volunteers to take on tasks such as

preservation and conservation of natural resources, those groups can actually be more effective than governmental mandates and restrictions on the commons (Van Vugt & Snyder 2002). This finding is supported by further research which claims that fostering community from within actually leads to more community participation than community management, typically (Shields et al. 2021). The term “collaborative governance” is discussed concerning the task of preserving urban green infrastructure from strain over time and use (Buijs et al. 2016). In addition, events welcoming diverse groups promote “pluralistic citizenship”, which focuses on community members collaborating through unity and celebration of differences to self-organize to protect an environment. Specifically, one study looks at the welcoming of diverse groups through documentary film festivals (Roy 2016).

A chapter of a book on documentary film festivals entitled *Fostering Community and Solidarity* thoroughly explores how these events have the effect of bringing people together. The chapter discusses society’s “atomization,” wherein capitalism encourages people to buy items for the sake of individualism as opposed to sharing—thereby eliminating the idea of the “collective.” It is argued that film festivals create a public non-commercial space, which aims to “spark debate, mold public opinion, shape policy, and build activist networks.” In addition, because people are attending the festival as a leisure activity, their attitude at the event is more open and receptive. Documentary content at the film festivals is described as content that the patrons who attend would probably not have watched on their own. All of these factors collectively have the effect of creating a spiritual experience (2016). The qualities of this specific event are immensely helpful at creating a starting conjecture as to what kind of content at other events might spark an inclination to protect one’s environment, through the celebration of diversity. The goal of my

study would then be to expand on those qualities—as documentary film festivals are rather specific—in order to give a wider-reaching guide for communities planning events.

Also, understandably, community members who feel attached to a location are more inclined to protect, maintain, and enhance that location. If a community holds a non-for-profit event, street fair, or other collectively planned gathering which celebrates differences and promotes inclusion, and attendees have a fond memory of that location, they will work harder to care for that land (Stevenson 2021). Also, there is more extensive research on “sense of place”. Jakobcic examines the meaning of place attachment thoroughly by noting how these meanings are shaped. He specifically studies the impact of regional park districts, “rhetorical discourse of place narratives,” and imaginaries over time (2020). Perhaps, events which highlight the actual location, physical land, and natural features of that land, can be even more powerful at heightening an individual’s place attachment.

Finally, research exists which takes a look at how leaders of a community might use their power to promote a sense of community, therefore increasing the town’s sustainability. One task that leaders can impact are the urban layouts of their location. They can use the location of businesses to celebrate the owners’ diverse offerings, be it food or other goods (Kohon 2018). Also, policymakers have the influence to be able to integrate equity of diverse populations when considering who in their community can access the use of clean energy. The amount of affluent versus underserved parts of communities who receive funding for the education about and installation of clean energy infrastructure is unbalanced, but leaders can ameliorate this issue by keeping equity at the forefront of every new energy project (Jung 2012). Even the affluent members of a community can use their clout to better their local environments, because “those who already enjoy economic and political influence are able to secure, amplify, and perpetuate

their own individual or group interest relative to those who do not. These processes form a feedback loop that reinforce existing inequities” (Colfer 2005). If the leader’s group interest takes the side of decreasing inequities as opposed to reinforcing them, they can stop the loop.

Although studies on the subject of community involvement through diversity and inclusion--therefore adding to community resilience--covers a wide spectrum, there are still questions left unanswered which can be explored in a new study. Adding on to the information discussing how leaders of a community can help promote environmental resilience, a new study could take a deeper look at what kinds of events they can fund and plan, and what kinds of organizations and activities they can promote. The study can further understand what kinds of events and activities promote a sense of community belonging the most effectively, in part by discovering which ones are best at celebrating diversity.

Discovering how community events and activity planning can promote environmental sustainability could be immensely important to the research community among contemporary debates on the importance of diversity in schooling, the current climate crisis, and the currently divided political sphere in the United States. A sense of belonging and inclusion is needed now, and if it can be fostered through an appreciation of space, land, and resources, then those natural tools can be preserved.

Methodology

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data for this research would be gathered through visiting a wide variety of types of events—at least 20—with a variety of content offered and consumed. These events also would vary regarding their location, in order to observe a greater representation of locations which may have different makeups of diversity present within their populations. Data at these

events would be gathered both through field observation and through interviews with event attendees.

The following is a list of potential events to visit:

1. A professional sports event
2. A food-eating contest
3. A film festival
4. A production of an opera
5. A production of a play
6. An art gallery
7. A farmer's market
8. A small music performance
9. A large music concert
10. A craft fair
11. A circus
12. A community clean-up day
13. A monument unveiling ceremony
14. A historic commemoration
15. A parade
16. A marathon
17. An educational workshop
18. A convention
19. A haunted house
20. A fireworks display

Observation of the events would consist of an assessment of how diversity is celebrated at the event, as well as a list of uniform questions to answer about each event. This would allow me to compare each event side by side efficiently, while being sure to answer my specific experimental question.

The uniform questions would be the following:

- What is the progression of happenings at the event? Is it linear?*
- What senses do the events stimulate? (Sight, Hearing, Taste, Touch, Smell)*
- Describe the people attending the event. (Physical appearance, age, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status)*
- Describe the people running the event (same criteria as above)*
- Describe how the people at the event are interacting, and their demeanors.*

-What time of day is the event, and how long does it run?
-Where is the location of the event? (Urban/rural, indoors/outdoors, type of building and space)

The interview questions of the attendees would begin as follows, with the possibility of further impromptu questions if necessary:

-Do you think this event celebrates diversity, and if so, in what ways?
-Does this event make you feel more inclined to care for the environment of this community, and if so, how does it make you feel this way?

In addition to interviewing the event attendees, I would attend five events which have the goal of improving or preserving the environment of the community in some way. At these events, I would interview the attendees and ask the following questions:

-How much do you feel diversity is present in your community, and in what ways?
-How much do you feel diversity is celebrated in your community, and in what ways?
-Was there an event that you attended that led you to participate in this community environment-supporting activity?

In order to gather the most accurate and meaningful information, I must study the expectations of event goers before each event, and comply as such. This includes studying the dress code of each event, and dressing to look like the majority of the people at the event in order to fit in. I will keep a running journal of descriptions of my own physical appearance at each event for thoroughness.

After and while gathering observations, I will interview the attendees at each event. Before doing so, however, I will establish rapport by telling my interviewees about my research project and letting them know that their responses will remain anonymous. This will avoid any confusion among the interviewees about my intentions as well as prompt honest responses, as the results of my study will not harm or affect the interviewees in any way.

Analyzing and Processing Data

To analyze the qualitative data I have gathered, I will compare the events to each other first by categorizing them based on my responses to the uniform questions answered about each event. In this way, I will assess similarities between the events. Then, I will pay special attention to events whose answers to these uniform questions were different from all of the others, and I will assess how those qualities affected my experience of the event. Next, I will compile a collection of ways in which I observed how the events celebrated diversity and draw conclusions from this collection. With the interviews I conduct at community environment-supporting activities, I will create a table of levels of diversity assessed in each community, and events which inspired the interviewees to attend the activity. I will then compare these tables back to the event observation and interview information. All of this cross-examination will create a thorough exploratory study.

Change to Methodology After Review

After presenting my proposed methodology to two colleagues, I was able to make some improvements to the study plan in order to gather more productive results and create a more organized analysis. Their recommendations were focused on the way in which I might decide what events to attend, and then how I might group and compare the information gathered afterwards.

Regarding the selection of events, one colleague suggested that I should be more deliberate about the locations in which the events take place. Specifically, I should study the demographics of the town according to census records, and select the locations so that a wide array of populations are represented. Then, I would be able to eliminate my first interview question presented to those contributing to their community: “How much do you feel diversity is

present in your community?” This data collected could be more accurate instead of solely based on perception.

Regarding the organizing of information, it was recommended that I create more specific ways of categorizing responses prior to actually conducting the field research. I could base these categories on my uniform questions I answer about the nature of each event. The most relevant question to use for categorization would be the question which asks which of the five senses the event stimulates, as my study aims to assess content rather than structure of events. Responses would then be categorized by content appealing to sight, hearing, taste, touch, or smell.

Recommendations for Further Research

In order to take this study to a more specific level once the results have been compiled, it would be useful to actually host an event in a community that displays the kind of content that I discover has most effectively promoted and celebrated diversity. Attendees of this created event would then be asked the same interview questions as attendees of the studied events, to find out if the research conclusions can be confirmed.

Conclusion

By the end of this study, I hope to be able to create recommendations for community members and leaders in order for these people to create events which most effectively celebrate diversity in their towns, and most effectively motivate the townspeople to care for the community's natural environment. With this new information, society will be able to better form a grassroots approach to the fight against climate change, effectively creating sustainable communities.

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