



# Community and Wellbeing in the Soapbox Model

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## Abstract

The aim of this research article was to explain and evaluate key tenets of the Soapbox model and platform. Soapbox is focused on highlighting the responsibility and capability of empowered individuals and inspired communities to create value and address societal challenges through collective betterment strategies. To conduct an in-depth analysis of the Soapbox model, this research article focused on exploring the key ideas of community and wellbeing as a focal point. The following research question was answered: How can being part of a community and engaging in community-based initiatives impact upon an individual's wellbeing? A mixed-methodology research approach was utilized, and secondary data was collected through desk-top research and synthesis of peer-reviewed social research and social psychology journal articles to address the research question. The conclusion drawn from theoretical findings and empirical cases indicated significant psychological benefits and a boost in wellbeing for individuals that were both part of a community and engaged in meaningful community-based initiatives. The results positively supported Soapbox's aims. Further research is required so that an in-depth analysis of each tenet within the Soapbox Model can be evaluated equally.

**Key Words:** Community, Wellbeing, Psychological Benefits, Community-Based Initiatives, Social Research, Social Psychology, Qualitative Research, Soapbox Model, Soapbox Platform.

## Methodology

To best answer the research question and evaluate the Soapbox Model, secondary desk-top research was conducted, using an integration of conceptual and empirical research. This methodology was best suited to capture a holistic understanding of the key tenets of the Soapbox Model, and then transition into an in-depth analysis regarding community and wellbeing (Braun and Clarke 2013; Wilson 2016). The Soapbox model is complex; it draws upon a broad range of interconnected key ideas: (1) the free market, the welfare state, and power-relations among actors leading to individual dissatisfaction, (2) empowerment and community development, (3) social innovation and market competition (Almalki 2016). The research design was therefore intentionally chosen to provide a flexible structure to enable the model to be understood while simultaneously enabling the research question to be answered.

A synthesis of social research and social psychology literature were analysed to address the research question: How can being part of a community and engaging in community-based

initiatives impact upon an individual's wellbeing? The research question met the criteria of being confined and focused on a narrow topic and developed to generate meaningful knowledge relating to the evaluation of the Soapbox model and platform. To ensure the research question would not be biased, it was formulated such that it was 'researchable, could be investigated scientifically, and answered empirically' (Sandberg and Alvesson 2010: 3-4). The rationale for the chosen research question will be explicated during the aim.

Secondary data was collected through desk-top research. The prominent limitation of this data collection method was that the data analyzed was not collected for this specific inquiry. Consequently, not all information obtained from secondary sources could be equally valid or reliable for the current purpose (Stewart and Kamins 1993). Therefore, there was a focus on greater precision and accuracy in gathering high-quality data and evaluating information (Emanuelson and Egenvall 2014; Trinh 2018).

## **Aim**

The primary purpose of answering the research question is to explore the key tenets of 'community' and 'wellbeing' in relation to the Soapbox model and platform. An in-depth focus on these concepts can be justified as it builds upon the current broad understanding of the Soapbox model tenets: (1) the free market, the welfare state, and power-relations among actors leading to a gap in individual fulfilment, (2) role of building citizen capability, empowerment, and community development, (3) social innovation and market competition.

Holistically, the Soapbox model highlights the challenges and limitations of a top-down approach as an effective solution for dealing with societal changes. A top-down approach is defined as an approach where higher-level stakeholders

and actors are responsible for decisions that filter down to lower-level stakeholders (local communities and individuals). The impact of this approach has left individuals disempowered in taking responsibility for transformative social change and collective action for the betterment of themselves and society. The criticisms of a top-down approach interlinked with the impacts of the free market upon consumers have propelled the creation of social value from a bottom-up approach for emotional fulfillment.

The Soapbox model therefore argues the need for individual actions and values to be aligned to avoid discomfort and live with greater purpose and meaning. Using competition amongst the free market, a bottom-up community development approach can create innovative and transformative change, which itself empowers individuals and communities. A bottom-up approach constitutes increasing the capabilities, opportunities, and skills of stakeholders from a grass-roots level to enact changes within society (Avelino et al. 2019).

From the Soapbox model, there is a greater weighting towards the idea of the development of communities, justifying the chosen research question. Answering the research question therefore has the potential to evaluate whether the Soapbox platform that prioritises a community-centred approach will meet the hypothesis of increasing emotional fulfilment, having positive psychological benefits, and fostering better wellbeing for participants.

## **Conceptual Analysis**

Within social research and social psychology literature, the conceptualization of community varies significantly (Arewasikporn et al. 2018; Fletcher et al. 2017; Phillips & Wong 2017). It can broadly refer to a physical and/or ideological space where individuals interact with other people, organizations, ideas, and cultures

(Fletcher et al. 2017, p. 105). This can occur in many forms, including cohousing, eco-villages, support groups, geographical proximity, formal group association, or online platforms. These communities can be homogenous and exclusive, or inviting to any individual to participate.

This research article is focused on communities and community-based initiatives that are created by members of civil society or non-governmental organizations, with an intentional focus and purposive action for civic participation and engagement. Purposive action in this context is defined as actions not only undertaken by a single member, but in cooperation with others towards achieving a common goal of being a source of answers to contemporary issues (Cook, cited in Phillips & Wong 2017: 53).

Communities and community-based initiatives through this lens encompass social integration (belongingness and solidarity), social contribution (to the common good), social coherence (of common beliefs), social actualization (of common purpose), and social acceptance (mutual trust and caring) (Phillips & Wong 2017). These attributes provide the foundation for ensuring positive wellbeing for individuals by engaging in intentional activity. Research therefore strongly supports the notion that communities that allow for a shared sense of social identity, cohesiveness, and link with Maslow's basic needs of involvement, are correlated with a higher level of individual wellbeing and positive psychological benefits (Arewasikporn et al. 2013; Fletcher et al. 2017; Phillips & Wong 2017, p. 108; Beal & Cavalieri 2019, p. 638).

Therefore, a higher satisfaction of wellbeing for individuals that are a part of a community or engage in community-based activities is evident, particularly in contexts where there is a socially shared purpose or genuine commitment for service and collaboration, reinforced over group interactions. Community interventions that increase opportunities for positive social

interaction have been shown to promote individual and community well-being by empowering individuals, building capabilities, and increasing social capital (Arewasikporn et al. 2013, p. 118). These findings strongly correlate with the aim of the Soapbox model and its community-based platform, which is focused on supporting the capability of empowered and inspired individuals or communities to address societal challenges through collective betterment strategies.

However, there are challenges affecting the wellbeing of individuals within a community or participating in community-based innovations. Positive psychological benefits from participation strongly rely upon the intrinsic motivation of each individual, along with their level of effort and willingness to contribute (Hansen and Spitzack 2011). As stated in the capability approach and building upon Maslow's hierarchy of need, 'behaviour is invariantly motivated in terms of self-actualization' (Bland & DeRobertis 2020, p. 936).

Another issue is that when dealing with community-based initiatives, the needs and desires of a community may not always be uniform. As a result, some group members may be left unheard or unjustly devalued. This can negatively affect the wellbeing of individuals taking part in these community projects. Therefore, it is important to have developed a strategy that recognises the diversity of needs and desires within community initiatives when working towards achieving a common output (Macdonald et al. 2017; Phillips & Wong 2017, p. 54; Beal & Cavalieri 2019).

Research strongly supports factors of positive psychological benefits for individuals that participate in communities and community initiatives. In order to maximise these benefits, the design of community engagement processes should assist all participants by enabling them to be connected to community life and supported in

their willingness to take part in an empowering manner (Kutek et al. 2011; Macdonald et al. 2017). In any community project, it is important to develop indicators—internal and external evaluation processes—to measure participant’s engagement and wellbeing (Hansen and Spitzack 2011).

### **Empirical Analysis**

Empirical analysis was used to provide evidence-based case studies that support the conceptual synthesis and literature review in answering the research question. The collected case studies utilised a mix of first-hand and secondary data collection involving semi-structured interviews, action research, workshops, online surveys, and other forms of research (Hansen & Spitzack 2011; Creamer 2014; Arewasikporn et al. 2018). Case study findings were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis.

In one case study, a community gardening intervention brought community members together toward a common goal of solving food insecurity and low nutrition within the local area. The community-based initiative facilitated feelings of connectedness and social cohesion, demonstrating positive psychological benefits (Okvat & Zautra 2011). Thus, shared positive experiences in the community demonstrate the potential to help form and strengthen social networks, increasing social capital, which in turn is theorised to play an important role in the reduction of health disparities (Arewasikporn et al. 2018, p. 118).

In another case study, rural men came together to tackle the issue of men’s mental health stigma and provide strategies to collectively promote mental health amongst rural men in Australia. The creation of this community enabled the participants to develop a sense of social support and empowerment over their own health, while also strategizing an initiative that could be

replicated and scaled across Australia (Kutek et al. 2011).

The final case study was of a community-based initiative in Scotland that wanted to address the impacts of climate change. Individuals came together to successfully plan and implement grassroots projects that reduced carbon emissions through activities such as local recycling collections, advocating for electric vehicle trials, and completion of home energy audits (Creamer, 2014: 989-992). This community led action led to mixed results in terms of individual wellbeing. Participants initially felt a sense of purpose and positive psychological benefits in making a difference within their community for a significant issue. However, after a few projects, they felt their capabilities were limited and that as a community they were ignored because of the lack of support from bigger stakeholders who could fund and upscale their successes.

### **Discussion**

The first key finding indicated by the research was the individuals that are part of a community and engage in community-based initiatives have a higher level of wellbeing and increased psychological benefits. It was noted specifically that the links to improved individual or community wellbeing were when the community was developed in the right social context, and used conscious action and collaboration towards tackling a shared goal. The case studies explored highlighted how individuals from a diverse range of ‘communities’ could benefit from engagement in community activities to develop meaningful solutions. The findings indicated communities created intentionally with social cohesiveness encouraged collaborative and altruistic behaviour from individuals, supporting positive indicators of social wellbeing. This finding supports the promising benefits of the Soapbox model and its community-based platform.

While communities and community-based initiatives can increase wellbeing of participating individuals, it is also necessary for participants to actively engage, collaborate, or otherwise be involved in purposeful action. The behaviour of participants is also inherently linked to their level of motivation and perception of the community's goal in alignment with their self-actualization (purpose). This raises a room for future research on how participants can be invited to join community-based initiatives, such that their involvement will maximise benefits, both for themselves as individuals and the commonly shared goal. It will also be important to develop measures that ensure participants' desires match the initiative, and that engagement throughout the community-based initiative will remain high. The development of indicators and measurements is significant in maximizing the wellbeing of participants and ensuring community project outcomes are met.

The final case study highlighted an important point about wellbeing for individuals within a community being impacted by broader socio-political forces. While the community-based initiatives in Scotland enabled participants to feel like they were at first making a difference on societal issues by tackling climate change, they became frustrated with the lack of response from larger stakeholders regarding their impact. This consideration is important to note, as communities may need to collaborate with multi-level stakeholders for a greater impact and a continued sense of empowerment in their actions.

This research article did not give equal weighting to each tenet within the Soapbox model. It focused in greater depth on the link between community development and wellbeing. There is a prompt for more in-depth analysis and exploration into the Soapbox model with a focus on different tenets.

## Conclusion

This research article answered the research question: How can being part of a community and engaging in community-based initiatives impact an individual's wellbeing? The research question enabled for an in-depth evaluation of two central tenets of the Soapbox model: community and well-being. Analysis was conducted through secondary-data collection and an integration of both conceptual and empirical research. The results were significantly promising for the benefits of the Soapbox model and platform; however, continued research is recommended.

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