Circles of community and the decline of civil society

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The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Department of Sociology

Circles of Community and the Decline of Civil Society

a dissertation

by

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Abstract

Circles of Community and the Decline of Civil Society

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This essay is based upon the results of an exploratory research project that explores the ways in which twenty-four (24) individuals, who self-identify as African Americans, define community and use those definitions to inform their perceptions and discussions about civic engagement, responsibility, and community memberships, key themes in the decline of community cultural critique. The research focuses on these themes because they are at the heart of the decline of civil society – individuals are becoming atomistic, alienated, and disengaged from social and interpersonal relationships with family members, neighbors and friends. This psychological and physical distancing leads to a lack of participation in community life and institutions and the loss of social and cultural capital.

The structural-functionalist and systemic analyses, upon which much of the decline of civil society social commentary is based, incorrectly assume a linear continuum of human and societal development. When in fact social, political, and economic development actually occur at different stages and at times simultaneously. There is a false dichotomy between the macrolevel theories of urban-rural, folk-peasant, organic-mechanical, and instrumental-expressive models often used to explain and, or predict the nature of conditions under which
social relationships and institutional dynamics occur. These macrolevel theories appear to ignore or at least minimize the significance of microlevel interactions. Microlevel interactions are formal, informal social and civic transactions that routinely occur in nearly every type of situation or setting.

Virtually everyone who participates in society is a member of multiple communities, what is referred to in this study as circles of communities. These multiple communities offer researchers the opportunity to investigate why and how people place themselves in spatial, social, ideological, and experiential relationship or proximity to other community members and institutions. They are also where we are able to locate community despite the pace of change and transformation in contemporary society.

The articulation of the decline of civil society as a social problem continues to privilege those with power and influence in American society. Academics, politicians, writers and editors, religious leaders, radio and talk show hosts and many others have been able to gain credibility, implement policies and impose normative standards for civic engagement. These standards are often used to identify insiders and outsiders in society. This research adds the voices of those who have been excluded from the discussion and recognizes them as experts both in terms of their own experiences and important contributors to the current body of social commentary and observations about community and associational living in modern America.
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The evolution and ultimate creation of this essay is a true testament to community. From my interview for a fellowship with one member of my committee and continuing relationship and mentorship by another committee member; to the research and employment relationship with the third committee member; to the ongoing support and acceptance of my membership in the Sociology department and community at Boston College; to Pine Manor College’s celebration and support of an alumna’s accomplishments; to the many family of friends in Boston and Syracuse who share in my success; finally, to the study participants who felt a sense of kinship and responsibility to assist me in achieving this milestone.

Thank you and God Bless.
INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the ways in which twenty-four (24) self-identifying African Americans define community and use those definitions to inform their perceptions and discussions related to civic engagement, responsibility and community memberships, some of the key themes in the decline of community cultural critique. The research is based upon the major themes of a theory of the decline of civil society – individuals are becoming atomistic, alienated, and disengaged from social and interpersonal relationships with family members, neighbors and friends. According to this theory, psychological, social, and physical distancing lead to a lack of participation in community life and institutions and the loss of social and cultural capital.

The study participants are African Americans, however, the goal of the research is not to present a discussion specifically or purposely framed within the context of the African American experience. The focus is not on the African American experience of community but on community as it is experienced by African Americans. Therefore, this analysis does not use race or the racialized experience of being an African American as the centralizing or connecting theme for the research or the essay. It uses the experience of African Americans as a way of understanding community and offers an opportunity to explore the role of subcommunities (circles of community) in the perpetuation and replication of community as a larger social and cultural phenomenon from a social and psychological standpoint.

Using a microlevel analytical approach to investigate the phenomenon of community (as opposed to the macrolevel analyses often used in historical and contemporary literature) asks the study participants to reflexively and somewhat self-consciously consider the often
unarticulated and yet guiding definitions of community in their lives. It also seeks to identify points of convergence and divergence between the personal understandings of community and the public discussions about the subject in the social commentaries on the decline of civil society.

Often in sociology, researchers are encouraged to pursue or choose research projects that are of interest and about which they are familiar. In this instance, the selection of both the research topic and the study population stem from my personal life and experiences. As an African American female I continue to be socialized by family, friends, mentors, and religious tradition, in order to understand and accept a moral obligation to use my abilities, skills, and resources to contribute to my own circles of community.

The genesis of my academic and intellectual investigation of community began during my graduate studies when enrolled in two courses that explored the concept of community and the transformation of civil society. Members of the classes described community as feelings or sensations such as a sense of belonging, comfort, acceptance, tension, repression, and the familiar. It was also defined in terms of physical or geographical areas. The students in the classes perceived community as multi-dimensional. It is interesting to have community defined as objectively real in terms of a location and at the same time defined as a subjective feeling. This seeming contradiction makes community a compelling subject of research.

My personal pursuit to understand community and social responsibility began long before the intellectual. It began during the 1960’s when I started reading books about the common struggles of African Americans in the United States and individuals in other parts of the world, particularly on the continent of Africa. It also stemmed from a keen interest in self-empowerment and self-determination. The African American literature of the 60’s and 70’s
helped me forge a strong sense of responsibility and obligation to always be mindful of the contributions that I should make to my community. As I grew older, I was employed by community-based social service agencies and served under the mentorship of individuals whose lives and worldviews embody community.

Decline of Community

The reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality. It does not require additional verification over and beyond its simple presence. It is simply there, as self-evident and compelling facticity. I know that it is real. While I am capable of engaging in doubt about its reality, I am obliged to suspend such doubt as I routinely exist in everyday life. This suspension of doubt is so firm that to abandon it, as I might want to do, say, in theoretical or religious contemplation, I have to make an extreme transition. The world of everyday life proclaims itself and, when I want to challenge the proclamation, I must engage in a deliberate, by no means easy effort. … Everyday life is divided into sectors that are apprehended routinely, and others that present me with problems of one kind or another (Berger and Luckman, 1966:23-24).

Berger and Luckman (1966) discuss everyday life in terms of an objective reality at once created and reaffirmed by an individual as well as others. Everyday life or reality is a social construction and provides the framework for the experiential and psychological conditions in which individuals exist. Community is a part of everyday life. It is also a function of and a co-creator of civil society. Community is a process by which and through which individuals construct identities, interact with other people, and develop a sense of self and place in the world.

It is important to emphasize that the relationship between man, the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remains a dialectical one. That is, man (not, of course, in isolation but in his collectivities) and his social world interact with each other. The product acts back upon the producer (Berger and Luckman, 1966:61).

Therefore, any assessment of the conditions of civil society must consider the presence or existence of community within the context of civil society.
Community is socially, politically, economically, culturally, and historically-situated, if not based. What this means is that it is socially constructed and primarily experiential. Community is interpreted and lived within the contexts of these different spheres of contemporary life. Within the social construction of reality framework, we understand that institutions, structures, norms, values, mores, and traditions develop from socially constructed definitions and contexts. Institutional and personal definitions and interpretations of everyday life significantly influence the decisions and actions of individuals and institutions. Therefore, it is helpful for social researchers to understand the roots (or historical contexts) of these definitions and then identify the ways in which they guide and direct social life.

Just as Thomas Kuhn (1996) in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* acknowledges the impacts of paradigms on science, researchers should discuss the effects and impacts of community paradigms. Community theories are paradigms. They reflect historical analyses and interpretations of social experiences and the evolution of a society. The paradigms are long-standing and exert an influence across time and space. As theories of community evolve, new interpretations and definitions of community develop. They in turn can lead to a new theory or application of an old one.

A perfect example of the relationship between theory and practice is the social response of the decline of civil society paradigm. Public policies, perceptions of community, democracy and member responsibility have developed from this community analysis and paradigm. For example, politicians, bureaucrats, clergy, and educators develop strategies to address the purported social effects identified by community theories. Robert Putnam and Amitai Etzioni are not the only, nor are they the first, researchers to suggest there is an inverse relationship between the economic and social systems. That is, innovation and integration
within the economic system lead to disintegration and stagnation in the social system. What is interesting is that the assumptions these authors make about human behaviors and attitudes appear to resonate with individuals across a wide range of disciplines and have longevity and currency. Debates about the decline of civil society and the transformation of community have been ongoing for over ten years.

Structural-functionalist and systemic analyses upon which much of the decline of civil society social commentary is based, incorrectly assume a linear continuum of human and societal development. When in fact social, political, and economic development actually oftentimes occur in overlapping stages and at times simultaneously. There is a false dichotomy between the macrolevel theories of urban-rural, folk-peasant, organic-mechanical, and instrumental-expressive models often used to explain and, or predict the nature of conditions under which social relationships and institutional dynamics occur. These macrolevel theories appear to ignore or at least minimize the significance of microlevel interactions. That is, the formal, informal social and civic transactions that routinely occur in nearly every type of situation or setting.

Microlevel interactions are formal, informal social and civic transactions that routinely occur in nearly every type of situation or setting. Microlevel (individual) and macrolevel (institutional and structural) exchanges are a function of each other. However, contemporary discussions about the decline of civil society argue that the actions of individuals are the primary cause of the loss of community and the decline of civil society. Whether the specific subjects under discussion are a lack of personal responsibility, demonstrated reduction in membership or participation in traditional and recognizable forms of organizations, or the
impact of women working outside of the home and the loss of social capital, the central focus is on the role of the individual social actor as opposed to the individual institutional actor.

The articulation of the decline of civil society as a social problem continues to privilege those with power and influence in American society. Academics, politicians, writers and editors, religious leaders, radio and talk show hosts and many others have been able to gain credibility, implement policies and impose normative standards for civic engagement. These standards are often used to identify insiders and outsiders in society.

Wither Community in the Face of Modernity?

The crucial question is not whether civil society is increasing or decreasing in importance, as Robert Putnam poses the issue. Or mainly changing, as Frank Riessman would have it, as self-help mutual and other less conventional forms grow. The broader challenge is the image of civil society that will prevail. Will the developing civil society promote democracy, empower participation, foster social values, widen perspectives, decrease inequalities, produce a kinder, gentler society? Or will the American civil society become more self-centered, more nasty to the poor, more commercialized? (Miller, 1996:22).

Much of the contemporary research and discourse on the state of community and civil society in America analyzes social or community transformation from a macrolevel, structuralist theoretical framework. In the community-economy dichotomy, the economic structures and processes mediate relationships in society. The decline of civil society social commentary suggests that as the economic system becomes more differentiated and further removed from the individual or the individual loses control over both the production and distribution of goods, services, and labor, the close intimate ties between individuals and the objects of production become tenuous. In their place, on the economic level, is a highly specialized and differentiated economic system governed by contractual and impersonal relationships.
One consequence of this phenomenon is that individuals, in their face-to-face interactions with each other, can become more distant and impersonal and the nature and strength of the bond between individuals change. Communal relationships, once expressive, transform and become instrumental. The nature of work and the level of independence or interdependence become the primary determinants of the manner and the extent to which there is a sense of belonging, connectedness, and community in the new economic system.

The transformation to a knowledge-based economy, the decline in manufacturing jobs, plant closings, and relationships of companies to offshore communities affect public and private lives and activities. However, the specialization of labor and the differentiation of the means of production create their own corresponding social and institutional dynamics and forms. An acknowledgement of this phenomenon appears lacking in the economic model of community change. As a consequence, social commentators such as Putnam and Etzioni need to acknowledge the profound impacts of institutional and public decisions and actions on civil society and community in the sense of gemeinschaft. It also means that rather than placing the source of the perceived social problem, in this case the decline of civil society, at the level of the individual and the personal, there should be a serious consideration of the role that institutional actors and decision-makers play in the creation or decline of society.

The decline of civil society theory, most widely espoused in the works of Robert Putnam and Amitai Etzioni, emphasizes a pathological analysis of contemporary society, whether or not that pathology in reality exists. For example, they believe that contemporary society is experiencing moral decay. The cause of which is a growing sense of individualism and selfishness. Lack of participation is traditional organizations (i.e., PTAs, bowling leagues, Leagues of Women Voters, and churches), decreased contact with neighbors and social
networks, and an ever-increasing lack of trust in the major institutions in the country are all viewed by decline of society social commentators as indicators of a significant crisis in community and threat to the formation of social capital in America. One result of the activities of highly vocal and influential decline of civil society pundits is that the willingness of so many different sectors of society to support these claims and the resonance of communitarian theories in our culture privileges the perspective of the few who are making a relatively uninformed assessment and analysis of the behaviors of others.

The decline of civil society theory of community transformation is closely connected to the concept of a crisis in community. In fact, following the line of argument in the theory, one might assume that the perceived crisis of community is the direct result of the decline of civil society. In the decline of civil society literature, crisis in community does not make a distinction between the roles of individual and institutional actors in the creation, perpetuation, and decline of civil society. This theory does not take into account the power and influence that structural forces have on individual and collective behaviors in society as a whole, and the circles of community, in particular.

For the purpose of this research project, the crisis of community frame in the decline of civil society literature has been reinterpreted to make a distinction between institutions and individuals. Crisis of community spirit and attitudes is related to individual actions and perceptions of others. Crisis in community refers to the decline of community institutions. There is some disagreement among the participants as to whether or not there is a crisis of community spirit and attitudes. However, they agree that changes are occurring in contemporary society and recognize that many of the changes are not conducive to creating or sustaining a community.
The interviewees’ acknowledge the symbiotic relationship between the actions of community members, institutions, and public policies.

The study participants recognize that a society or community can be transformed because of individual actors and they understand that actions are sometimes motivated by self-interest. However, study participants also acknowledge that economic, social, educational, religious, and political forces affect the strength and sustainability of a community. In fact, individually and, or collectively these forces can lead to the rise or demise of a community. For example, VJ describes a community that was destroyed by a public policy decision to revitalize the area. Financial resources were poured into the area to demolish and then rebuild the public, transportation, and housing infrastructure. As a result, the residents were displaced and the community eliminated. Ironically, years later everything had to be replaced because deterioration and decay. The community that was there prior to the revitalization was lost and nothing close to resembling it developed in its place.

Race, Culture, Ethnicity and the Decline of Community

The individuals who participate in this research project see themselves as human beings first. They all too often feel that whites see them through the lens of race, and as little else. As they honestly and openly considered the key themes of this study, there is a connection between race, culture, and identity and community in their lives. However, it is not necessarily a conscious, or self-conscious for that matter, consideration as they make choices about where they work, worship, socialize, or reside.

Some might argue that Blacks (African Americans) in America have developed a meaning of community that is in direct response to the structural forces (institutional, historical, and social racism and discrimination) within this country. If so, then one definition
and function of community would be to serve as a defensive or survival mechanism for African Americans. Even if that were the case, the issue is still what is it that Blacks do to create community and understand community. As well as what are the ways in which individual and collective behaviors are mediated or dictated by other definitions of community.

One of the ongoing debates is whether or not there is a black culture in the United States. In *Black Metropolis* the authors state that the differences between the development of the Negro institutions in Bronzeville in terms of their development and 'culture' is directly related to "... [being] a part of a larger, national Negro culture, its people being tied to thirteen million other Negroes by innumerable bonds of kinship, associational and church membership, and a common minority status." (p.396) Drake and Clayton do not argue that the types of Negro institutions are different from the white institutions, but only in terms of how they develop and possibly in the role that they play within the black cultural context. They also believe as W. E.B. DuBois does that there is a two-ness about blacks or a bifurcated consciousness that Dorothy Smith writes about in *Conceptual Practices of Power*. This bifurcated consciousness makes blacks at once conversant and familiar with white institutions as well as adept at maneuvering within and around the institutions, while at the same time developing and maintaining institutions to address the specific needs and concerns that grow out of the specific cultural situation or context. The authors of *Black Metropolis* are not the only ones who speak about a black culture. Two of the individuals interviewed speak quite openly and honestly about being black in America and the relationship between Americans of African descent with each other and others of African descent in the Diaspora.
Ethnic, racial, and cultural groups personalize community to address particular issues.\(^1\) Ethnic enclaves research is relevant to this investigation of community because it provides insight into certain aspects of group cohesiveness, culture, history and cultural traditions. Historically, in many ways the social and cultural subcommunity experiences of African Americans is similar to the immigrant experience. True, the circumstances in which the African American subcommunity finds itself may differ from some of the ethnic or immigrant experiences but the usefulness and applicability of the analysis remains.

Ethnicity, ethnic cooperation, social supports and networks have been written about extensively in the works of Ivan Light (1993, 1994, 1995). The focus of his work is on the intersection and interrelationship between culture, ethnicity and economic development or entrepreneurship. The work does not address the subjective or ontological experiences or motivations of the ethnic entrepreneurs. Light’s work might shed some light on certain historical or cultural norms, traditions and values that support and encourage the type of interconnectedness that is engendered or manifested by the immigrant experience.

In racial, ethnic, and cultural communities, there may in fact be a thriving civil society. Racial and ethnic groups participate within their communities and social capital and social responsibility is evident. Putnam writes in his article, “The Prosperous Community Social Capital and Public Life,”

For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. When economic and political negotiation is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced. At the same time, networks of civic

\(^1\) Adaptations of community are not limited to these characteristics.
engagement embody past success at collaboration. Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broadened the participants’ sense of self, developing the “I” into the “we,” or (in the language of rational-choice theorists) enhancing the participants’ “taste” for collective benefits.2

This is a sweeping statement and there has been no evidence put forth by Putnam that it is as generalizable across all communities and for all groups as he would make it seem. That is the test of his theory. In some ethnic enclaves his idea about the value of having such a community may be borne out, but again not for everyone and not necessarily for an indefinite period of time.

The participants in this study recognize and acknowledge the changes in community over time. They lament the loss of the closeness and sense of comfort and safety once present for them in the communities of their youth. Yet, they remain optimistic. More importantly, they remain committed and engaged in activities that reflect a sense of community consciousness or awareness. The participants continue to make choices about where to invest their time, resources, and talents based upon their sense of community and membership.

The relationship between race and community is full of complexities. It is not simply the imposition of an ascribed status or socially constructed and politically expedient concept on an individual or collective. Just as community is both active and passive, so is race. As an internalized and embedded construct, race is transformed based upon the use of the term, internalization and appropriation, and the context within which it is being understood.

In the following excerpt from Putnam’s article, “The Prosperous Community Social Capital and Public Life,” we should note a number of assumptions that he makes about the nature, quality, and conditions of inner city life, particularly for blacks and Latinos.

Although most poor Americans do not reside in the inner city, there is something qualitatively different about the social and economic isolation experienced by the chronically poor blacks and Latinos who do. Joblessness, inadequate education, and poor health clearly truncate the opportunities for ghetto residents. Yet so do profound deficiencies in social capital. Part of the problems facing blacks and Latinos in the inner city is that they lack “connections” in the most literal sense (1993:39).

The substance of his argument is a racialized analysis of community in urban centers. However, it is not presented or discussed in this way.

The first assumption he makes is that the experiences of the inner city (urban) poor are different from those in rural areas. Putnam says that they are qualitatively different in terms of their experiences of social and economic isolation. However, we have no way of knowing the magnitude or order of these differences as well as what the basis of these differences might be. Historically, most rural areas have not received the attention of policy makers. Therefore, a number of the health, education, economic and community development programs and resources are not available to members of those communities. In some rural communities, there are no healthcare facilities. The educational system may be struggling because of an inadequate tax base. Generally, rural areas do not have a diverse economic base upon which to build public infrastructure or a solidly diverse industrial base or sector. Combine that with the social and cultural location of non-whites in many of these communities and we find that being poor, black, or Latino in rural American can lead to ever-greater isolation and alienation.

The second assumption Putnam makes is that the inner city is a ghetto, an area in which the residents have little or no access to resources or social capital. He writes, “Where you live and whom you know – the social capital you can draw on – helps to define who you are and thus to determine your fate” (1993:39). Putnam bases his comments on labor economists Lawrence Katz and Anne Case whose work analyzes the extent to which
communities with different levels of social capital affect both the choices and opportunities for youths living in them. This is a deterministic approach to community and human development. Most of us recognize that individuals with access to certain types of material and social resources are afforded opportunities. However, to suggest that individuals without these same resources have limited opportunities and that geography (where one lives) is a major factor in predicting future success and opportunities plays into race, class, and cultural biases. Social networks and informal relationships often provide information about employment, access to resources, and educational opportunities. City names, neighborhood addresses, and zip codes are used to discriminate against individuals. However, there is no conclusive evidence to support the claim that where you live and the nature and complexity of your social network determine your fate.

Metropolitan cities have areas where there are high incidences of poverty, blight, and decay but not necessarily across the board. Putnam’s belief that poor black and Latino urban residents (there is no mention or reference to poor white residents) lack connections to resources and social capital does not take into consideration the informal social exchange networks that Carol Stack identifies in her book *All Our Kin*. It also does not acknowledge the social services and community-based organization support and service delivery system and infrastructure located in most urban communities.

The formal and informal networks located within urban areas play a critical role in helping individuals sustain themselves. Contrary to what Putnam believes, blacks and Latinos have more than the churches as social capital. They have a complex and not necessarily visible network of friends, neighbors, and organizations. Urban residents, in general, have professional, technical, community/activist, special interest, as well as other formal or informal
organizations in the community. Whether or not the scope and impact of this network have been scientifically measured or quantified is not reason enough to discount its value or significance.

The last assumption or ‘gap’ in his analysis is related to a lack of significant emphasis on the structural determinants and barriers to the development and sustainability of community and therefore, by inference, social capital. Putnam does acknowledge the impacts of public policy decisions on social capital when he writes,

> We must weigh the risks of destroying social capital. Precisely because social capital is a public good, the costs of closing factories and destroying communities go beyond the personal trauma borne by individuals. Worse yet, some government programs themselves, such as urban renewal and public housing projects, have heedlessly ravaged existing social networks. The fact that these collective costs are not well measured by our current accounting schemes does not mean that they are not real. Shred enough of the social fabric and we all pay (1993:39).

However, his overall theory about the decline of community returns to an evaluation of what constitutes participation in the community and whether or not those activities reflect a commitment to community and understanding of membership responsibility. There is no integrated analysis of the external or public forces, their impacts and the private or individual reactions to those forces in his work. On the one hand, Putnam recognizes that there are intended and unanticipated consequences of social, public policy decisions, and political agendas, while at the same time seeming to attach more weight to the actions and behaviors of individuals.

Historically, the role of community among African Americans has included paving the way for others, laying the foundation for the future, and change-agent. The community, in this context, exemplifies what Putnam when he states “.... Social capital typically consists in ties, norms, and trust transferable from one social setting to another...” (1993:38). In “Bowling Circles of Community - Introduction
Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” he writes, ““social capital” refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995:67). The historical and contemporary legacy of African American communities is that there is indeed social as well as cultural capital. This social capital enables the individual and the collective to function in the face of obstacles and extreme circumstances.

However, the transferability of social capital may not be as automatic as Putnam would have us believe. Why? Social capital relies upon social relationships, presumptively positive relationships at that. What we know is that social relationships between actors are not the same across situations, nor are they based upon the same understandings and meanings in every situation. In order for this to be possible, actors would have to associate with in-group members only. Even then, there is an implicit assumption of homogeneity and agreement on values and meanings. Albert Hunter’s “Reply to Luloff and Wilkinson” helps us to understand this point. He writes,

Urban residents live in a number of different scales of local communities ranging from the social block to the neighborhood, the local community and the expanded community of the urban region. Furthermore, different functions, activities and sentiments of residents are seen to vary systematically from level to level. In the modern metropolis, people simply do not live in a single community; but, rather, function in what I call a symbolic system of hierarchical communities. An individual’s local communities will vary, not only throughout the life-span but even in the course of meeting his day-to-day life needs (1977:828).

Interestingly enough, I think that Hunter is referring to what one of the participants identifies as circles of community. Circles of communities are the multiple communities and memberships that individuals participate in as they carry out their daily lives.

Is there an overarching black community? There is no consensus on that. The answer is that it depends upon the context in which the question is being posed. Obviously, non-
African American individuals, regardless of the positions they may hold, believe there is a black community. The study participants express or articulate an understanding of a black community but there is no consistent or specific definition for it. For example, one of the participants stated that he thought of me as part of his community, in part because I am African American. However, he also states that race is not the only requirement for membership in the way he defines community or identifies members. Also, the participants’ definitions or expressions of community allow us to begin to understand the nature, scope, and significance of a black community in their lives and possibly in the lives of others.

Community and the Social Construction of Everyday Life

Tom Campbell (1981) in *Seven Theories of Human Society* speaks to the subjective or socially constructed interpretations of society, and indirectly community when he argues that there is no real consensus or widely accepted definition or way of understanding society. However, just as individuals operate within the context of an internal and often unarticulated definition of community, they also operate within the parameters of an internalized and reflexive understanding of society. He states, “[...] Society, for our purposes, is a term that refers to a more inclusive phenomenon, namely the whole complex network of human relationships within large-scale groups or collectivities that share a common culture and way of life” (1981:13). While this definition of society is not as comprehensive or metaphorical as the circles of community described by the participants in the study, it does offer a good point of departure for understanding what the decline of civil society community scholars and the participants understand community to be. Every group has an understanding or interpretation about the world around them and how it works.
The following chapters in this essay discuss the ontological and phenomenological aspects of community as well as points of convergence and divergence between the perspectives of the social commentators on the decline of civil society and the study participants. In a limited way the essay responds to S. M. Miller's concerns about the creation of a civil society that is fair, equitable, and inclusive. The participants of this study offer suggestions on ways in which to engage members, while at the same time identifying obstacles to achieving and experiencing an idealized sense of community.

Chapter One, In Search of Community, presents the main arguments found in the decline of community and civil society discussions and a detailed presentation and analysis of the main arguments presented in several works of Robert Putnam and Amitai Etzioni. The work of these two researchers is chosen because their theoretical propositions have been accepted in virtually all segments of our society. Public policy decisions are being made based upon the assumptions Putnam and Etzioni make about the economic transformation of society and its impact upon the nature of social interactions between individuals over time. Special interest groups have achieved levels of credibility and acceptability in terms of the ways in which they are able to align philosophical or religious tenets with arguments presented in theories of Putnam and Etzioni.

Chapter Two, Methodology, describes the research question, study design, research sample, and data collection strategies used in the study. The interview questions were constructed from a review of the literature, previous research, classroom discussions, conversations with family and friends, and a lifetime of my experiences as an African American woman.
The main objective of Chapter Three, Expressions of Community, is to present some of the interview responses describing study participants’ definitions of community and experiences of community in their daily lives. Definitions of community are based upon life histories and experiences, family dynamics and traditions, social interactions and associational relationships. One community does not exist for individuals; the reality is that there are multiple communities (circles of communities) in which they are members and participate. Sometimes, the community is the function of the various roles or identities they have in their lives.

Community boundaries, membership qualifications, perceptions of participation and responsibility are the topics discussed in Chapter Four, Acts of Community. The participants may not be as socially connected or engaged as they would like to be, however, they are aware of their interdependence and the responsibility they have to others. The participants recognize that individuals are in relationship with community and civil society. As such, there are certain norms and expectations of behavior just as in any other relationship. Reciprocity is a condition of civic participation and responsibility.

With membership comes responsibility or the expectation of responsibility and participation. The participants believe there is a tacit or implicit understanding of reciprocity between their fulfilling obligations as community members and the community’s obligation to them as members. There is a symbiotic relationship between individuals and community. This is contrary to what the literature and current debates on the decline of civil society argue. The discourse presents community’s participation in the lives of individuals as unchanging. Natural disasters, genocide, civil unrest and military upheavals fracture community and often create insurmountable obstacles for the development or resurrection of community in an area.
The final chapter, Chapter 5 (De)Constructing Community, explores the enduring nature of community, individual and collective commitment to the concept, experience, and reality. Regardless of the conditions or circumstances, ultimately, community persists because it is a part of everyday life. The nature and quality of an individual’s experience of community plays a significant role in the perceptions and commitment to different communities and interactions with members.

The essay concludes with Footprints in the Sand. This section presents specific research findings related to some of the obstacles to civic engagement, the relationship between definitions of community (expressions of community) and civic participation (acts of community), community membership, and characteristics of community. It also discusses the relationship between race, culture, ethnicity, and the decline of community.

The results of this exploratory research project are used to develop a counterargument or an alternative perspective to the decline of civil society argument. That is, it considers the primary issues of the decline of community theory within the experience of the circles of community identified and articulated by the study’s participants. The goal of this research is to identify the role, function, meaning, and manifestation of community as expressions and acts in the lives of individuals – community as a phenomenological and ontological experience.

The persistence of community is what makes community an interesting research topic. More importantly, from a research and public policy standpoint, this research is important because missing from the historical and contemporary literature and recent public discussions about the decline of community and the demise of civil society, are the experiences of different racial, ethnic and cultural groups. The experiences of these groups should be investigated and
discussed because they may provide insights into developing appropriate public policy and community organizing strategies.

Despite what many theorists argue about community, its demise, its destruction, its transformation, it is a resilient institution and a sustained idea or ideal, whether individuals create community based upon, for example, interests, history, experiences, culture, geography, or values. While the institutions within the community, as a physical form, may be undergoing significant changes, members of this study group continue to participate in communities and maintain a sense of obligation, moral sensibility, cultural and historical traditions, and finally, human responsibility and obligation to others. All that a community needs, whether an ideal or not, is “Just to have love, that’s it. Cuz, if you have love, I think that’s, that’s pretty much everything.”³

Virtually everyone who participates in society is a member of multiple communities. These multiple communities offer researchers the opportunity to investigate why and how people place themselves in spatial, social, ideological, and experiential relationship to other community members and institutions. They are also where we are able to locate community despite the pace of change and transformation in contemporary society. Community is an idealized form of kinship that affords members and non-members the opportunity to transcend socially-constructed differences.

³ Excerpted from EH’s interview.
CHAPTER ONE
IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY

American communities, it appears, are systems of change. The checks, which operate in them, do not restore them to a past status quo but to a new and different one. ... Cleavages there are, to be sure, and often violent ones. No one looks for inevitable progress; all that can be expected is that the crescine norms – the traditions of democratic community life – will be adequate to meet the new problems as they arise (Bernard, 1962:244-245).

At the heart of the discussion about community and the future of civil society are definitions of community, membership, responsibility and obligation. Each of us has an idea(l) of community that we express and manifest to others. Whether our definition of community has at its center (core) the people, as is the case with the study participants, or institutions the difficulty is in articulating an all-encompassing definition that we agree upon.

Anthony Cohen suggests that an approach to exploring community is to consider the ways it is interpreted. The social and phenomenological study of community is an effective way of exploring community. This type of analysis, when combined with quantitative data, presents a more comprehensive and realistic perspective of the role, experience, and collective and individual meaning of community.

A reasonable interpretation of the word’s use would seem to imply two related suggestions that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. ‘Community’ thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a relational idea: the opposition of one community to others or to other social entities. Indeed, it will be argued that the use of the word is only occasioned by the desire or need to express such a distinction (1985:12).

Cohen argues that looking at the parameters or the boundaries of community are the only way to uncover or determine the meaning or meanings that people have. This is realization of the relationship between boundaries; that is, the criteria or parameters of community.
Cohen states that when people talk about community or the community to which they belong there is an awareness of community. The study findings indicate this awareness of community is internalized and becomes an integral part of an individual’s sense of self and relationship to the world. The source of the awareness can be external stimuli that the individual uses as a frame of reference for interpretation and manifestation of community. It is this awareness of community that is a social construction created by, interpreted within, and perpetuated “by boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely consumed by people in interaction” (1985:13). The boundaries can be visible or invisible. For example, physical communities have geographical demarcations, streets, roads, signs, gates, walls and fences. Community members and non-members alike use boundaries as a means of determining the criteria for inclusion or exclusion. The boundaries of social communities and communities of interest are not necessarily as easily recognized as the physical or geographical boundaries of communities.

According to Cohen, community is a symbol used by individuals to differentiate, associate, and interpret social interactions and individual social relations within everyday life. As a symbol, community is a representation as opposed to a physical manifestation, although there are physical and identifiable structures mediating the relationships between people to and from this representation (community). Community is not a mediating structure. It is a representation (symbol) that enables the assimilation and integration of an individual into a given environment or set of social relations. This characteristic of community supports the claim of a socially constructed nature of community. However, the parameters are not broad enough because even a representation can serve as a mediating force while not have physical materiality.
Amitai Etzioni (1994) and Robert Putnam (1992, 1993, 1995, 1996) each put forth a set of arguments and observations about the state of civil society (community, commitment, loss of cohesion, loss of social capital and social responsibility) and posit that there is a crisis in community. The crisis in community is leading to the decline of civil society and as a consequence the loss of social capital. These two authors represent the many voices of those who argue that community (civil society) is in decline. In fact, that the crisis of community is a social problem affecting us all. Their analyses are essentially macrolevel analyses based upon aggregated survey data. They impute the demise of community to individual action or inaction and do not discuss the roles and actions of community institutional actors in the decline of community.

Etzioni recognizes that people participate in multiple communities but he suggests that there should be a supracommunity. In the article, “The Community of Communities,” Etzioni calls for a supracommunity; one that co-exists with the other communities and specialized social organizations, yet is paramount to all others. The communitarians seem to espouse a variant of a mechanical solidarity philosophy at the supracommunity level. “[...] It is in this type of society that a totality of beliefs and sentiments common to all men exists [...] the collective conscience” (Tönnies, 1963:13). Etzioni also does not explain what the values of the supracommunity will be, how they will be derived, or how the communitarians propose to encourage loyalty and affinity for this overarching community. He does not fully explain how to avoid the tensions between affinity and attachment for the subcommunities and those for the supracommunity. The study participants engage in the process of creating a hierarchy of community in their lives. This hierarchy of community or prioritization will impact the communitarians’ supracommunity. Given the geographic, demographic, political, religious,
social and economic differences in the U.S., the process communitarians will use to foster this supracommunity is unknown. Also, the creation of a supracommunity is likely to be a challenge.

Etzioni has identified a number of problems within civil society. Two of the issues that he raises and which are addressed in this essay are the: (1) lack of civic-mindedness on the part of individuals, and (2) individualistic needs take precedence over the collectivistic needs.

Some of the limitations to his points are:

(1) The state of the communities is such that there is a climate of fear and crime. Mistrust is another truth used to support the claim that we have gone too far in the direction of restitutive rights and individualism. If in fact people are fearful or feel unsafe, it is not only because of a small number of community members who engage in criminal and potentially harmful activities. It is also because public policies, including housing, municipal services, code enforcement, police protection, and media representation of certain classes of individuals have created public perceptions that lead people to be afraid.

In terms of a general social condition, Etzioni’s point is an extreme statement in that it disregards the fact that the majority of Americans believe in the rule of law and follow the law. In addition, the broad brush claim that residents are becoming hostile to one another disregards the fact that in cities, towns, and neighborhoods in the U.S. most groups live together without conflict. If there is an increase in hostility, it is often related to such issues as racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism. While these ‘isms’ may be a part of the American social fabric, they are not American values. This is one of the flaws in the communitarian argument. It does not acknowledge the strongly held American values and expectations that are the foundation upon which social life is constructed. In the
communitarian worldview, the problem is the individual, without acknowledging that the individual is both enabled and constrained by social situations, by others, and most importantly by institutions.

(2) One of the more central themes in Etzioni’s and Putnam’s commentaries and prescriptions for community life is that civic-mindedness and social responsibility have declined and given way to an individualism and self-interest harmful to society. The difficulty with this proposition is the way in which it is operationalized and the dimensions used to investigate it. If, as Putnam does, Etzioni and other communitarians believe that the measure of civic-mindedness is achieved through memberships in PTAs, Boy Scouts (there was no mention of Girl Scouts), fraternities and sororities, bowling leagues, Leagues of Women Voters and the like, then they are perhaps not identifying potential or existing areas in which civic engagement is taking place. Some of the organizations the social commentators identify as both contributors to social capital development and indicators for the decline of civil society have been more prominent in suburban or rural than urban areas. Social commentators are also not considering generational issues and transformations.

The Economist, reported that ‘[…] American’s social engagement, far from sinking on down, is already rebounding’ (1995:21). The author asks a question that seems to be on point, ‘[…] Could it be that that, like so much else, the association business is undergoing change, downsizing, becoming less corporate and more local?’ (1995:22) This study, as well as others, demonstrates that individuals are engaged in civic and community activities and remain committed to a social and civic ethos that ensures the continued development of social capital in America.
A particularly problematic position is that self-interest is not the antithesis to community and is compatible with social responsibility and commitment to community. This is an interesting premise because on the one hand it suggests an individual can espouse the collective conscience of the mechanical solidarity society (without the homogeneity) and the organic solidarity society of interdependence. There is no clear example of how this can occur and there is no explanation of compatible individual or collective interests. However, there are gradations of self-interest through which an individual engages in social behavior in support of the community’s objectives and spirit.

Unlike Putnam, who uses individuals born between 1919 and 1940 as the standard bearers, it seems that much of the discussion in Etzioni’s communitarian model is explained or exemplified by the behavior of young people. This is one of the difficulties with the Etzioni model of community change. First, it assumes that young people, their parents, grandparents, and other adults feel the same way about the world. Two of the interviewees discuss the difference in generational attitudes and perspectives. An individual’s place in the lifecycle affects his or her level of civic participation as well as perceptions of community. The other difficulty is that there is no weight given to the majority of young people who are good people, do not get into trouble, obey the law, attend school and espouse what have been, and arguably still are, American values such as honesty, integrity, respect for parents, and for other people’s property.

Society should look at the trends in the behaviors of young people although not for the reasons suggested by Etzioni. They are the next generation who will make policy decisions, work in all sectors of the economy, and inherit our society’s social, political, and economic structures. To suggest that the younger generation’s behaviors and attitudes represent the
norm for current and future civil society does not take into consideration the efforts of others to encourage young people in terms of leadership and the spirit of social obligation throughout society.

Putnam notes the countervenets to his arguments and at the same time he dismisses them. In the past, he stated that mass-membership organizations such as AARP, the Sierra Club, and the Environmental Defense Fund offered no social connectedness. He has since reconsidered that position and recognizes the role of these organizations in civil society. Putnam also acknowledges that nonprofit organizations play a role in civic life. However, he still seems to discount these organizations as major institutional actors in civil society.

There is evidence of ongoing and sustained civic participation by individuals in society. That is not to say that in some areas of civic life there is no loss of community. Perhaps the decline in civic participation is not as pervasive as Putnam and Etzioni, as well as many others, believe among all groups in contemporary society. More importantly, it may be that any analysis of community should acknowledge the roles of all segments of a community and investigate how those community components affect actions of members.

Despite the fact that memberships are decreasing in some organizations and the absolute number of organizations traditionally associated with civil society may be decreasing, civil society is not necessarily on the decline. The use of national quantitative surveys that do not include the qualitative contextual analysis, provides answers to only one part of the question — what are people doing? Putnam and Etzioni base their arguments on national survey data such as the General Social Survey, Census data, and Gallup Polls. Etzioni in, *The Spirit of Community*, refers to a 1989 study conducted by People for the American Way.
Sampson (1988) suggests that researchers who use individuals and their behaviors to explain what is going on at the macrolevel have neglected two crucial issues: the macrosocial determinants of community social organization and the contextual effects of community structure on individual behavior. A major reason for this gap appears to be the typical design of the sample survey in modern sociological research... This shifted the unit about which empirical statements were made from the community to the individual... In effect, the emphasis on representative population surveys has channeled research to an individual level of analysis and to focus on causally proximate (i.e., individual) factors (Sampson, 1988:776).

I agree with Sampson when he states,

Future research should improve on the present effort by using survey data in innovative ways that permit more precise measurement of the processes by which community social integration is affected by both individual-level and broader, structural-level forces. Of particular interest would be further examination of the micro- and macro-level forces that influence individual friendships and leisure activities in the community, and how these in turn feed back to affect the community’s macro-level system of social organization (Sampson, 1988:778).

Whenever possible, future community research should include exploring the connections between acts of community, which is the focus of the decline of civil society research. Acts of community for the purposes of this research is being defined as activities individuals engage in and ‘expressions of community’, which is the focus of this research, are the meanings and perceptions of community expressed by the study participants. There is a direct relationship between individual perceptions of community and the manifestations of those perceptions in terms of direct action.

Motivation is a key point in the analyses of Etzioni and Putnam. They analyze reported activities and attitudes and use the findings to help determine what motivates people to act. Blum and McHugh (1971) suggest,

To provide a motive, then is to formulate a situation in such a way as to ascribe a motive to an actor as part of his common sense knowledge, a motive to which he was oriented in producing the action. Thus to give a motive is not to locate a cause of the action, but is for the observer to assume how a behavior is socially intelligible by ascribing a socially available actors orientation (Blum and McHugh, 1971:100).
Both Putnam and Etzioni ascribe motives to Americans that may or may not be accurate. Their analyses are based upon quantitative data aggregated to determine what people say they are involved in but the data do not provide information about what motivates participation or how the individuals feel as a result of that participation. The analyses do not reflect an understanding or interpretation of personal or subjective data.

The communitarians are on the mark when describing the needs that community meets in an individual’s life. Etzioni states,

That free individuals require a community, which backs them up against encroachment by the state and sustains morality by drawing on the gentle prodding of kin, friends, neighbors, and other community members, rather than building on government controls or fear of authorities (Etzioni, 1994:15).

The proposition that individuals require a community in order to mediate and possibly protect them from administrative structures is something that would resonate with the study participants. The interviewees feel that the community should address their needs and protect their interests. However, it is questionable as to whether or not the participants in this study or other members of contemporary society feel that the primary role of community is to exercise social control and coercive pressure to ensure adherence to a subjective set of moral codes and standards. In Etzioni’s model of contemporary life, the purpose of community is not to address the psychological and physical needs of members and non-members but to provide the framework to ensure that individuals behave in acceptable ways in the community.

To the extent that we have lost community, we need to rebuild it, not only because community life is a major source of satisfaction of our deeper personal needs, but because the social pressures community brings to bear are a mainstay of our moral values (Etzioni, 1994:40).

Etzioni, like the study participants, identifies an important function of community in people’s lives – it meets personal needs.
Communitarians should not be allowed to define for the rest of society the areas of our lives where community connections are made or exist, the nature of those relationships or the cohesiveness of those bonds. No one group should have the power and authority to exercise control over the actions of others simply because the institutional infrastructure chooses to privilege and adopt its perceptions of morality and acceptable behaviors. This subjects community members to the potential abuses of coercion and oppression. The repressive character of Etzioni’s supracommunity is an extreme response to the communitarian proposition that individualism is pervasive in contemporary society. Putnam and Etzioni have not made a strong enough argument that community is on the decline. Perhaps the real issue is that the limitations of their respective analyses are not completely acknowledged or identified. The exercise of unchecked power and control over behaviors and ideas is anathema to the American ethos.

Institutions exercise power and control in society. In fact, the social commentaries on civil society’s transformation rely on the relative strengths and effectiveness of these institutions in order to help determine a community’s strength, sustainability, and level of social capital. Therefore, the interactions between institutions, members, and non-members define and sustain community. The dynamics of the relationship or interactions between individuals and institutional actors have implications on civic behavior because individuals will choose to participate in civic life based upon, for example, their perceptions of the responsiveness of the institution to their needs, value or contributions of the institution to their community or families, and most importantly whether they believe the institutions value who they are and feel a sense of responsibility or obligation to them.
Changes in community member behaviors, attitudes, and support of institutions may be the result of a natural or evolutionary process. For example, if individuals change the nature of their interactions with each other in response to new technological developments then it is possible for institutions to change as well. Perhaps the types of institutions have changed. By not acknowledging the change and its possible implications, Putnam and Etzioni are missing areas in which community and social networks exist. Seth Borgos and Scott Douglas address this issue to a certain extent in the article, “Community Organizing and Civic Renewal: A View from the South.” They argue that what is being overlooked in the civil society debate are the contributions community organizing make to civil society. The contributions of community-based organizations are being overlooked as well.

While Etzioni talks about social responsibility and rights, Putnam discusses social capital. The relationship between these two social commentaries is that actions and perceived attitudes of individuals are central to each of the arguments. Also, Etzioni is discussing process and Putnam is focusing on outcomes. The actions of individuals lead to the creation or loss of social capital.

Putnam states that America loses its social capital as individuals become more focused on themselves and individual rights. As a consequence, many individuals no longer participate, for example, in elections, social organizations, or professional or civic-oriented associations. Putnam uses residential stability or length of residence as part of the analysis for his decline of community thesis. However, he does not differentiate between the various characteristics of communities such as size, location, rural or urban, growing or declining. In addition, he does not discuss the impact of class on attachment and involvement at the community level.
Putnam argues that there are fewer associational relationships in cities. This is an incomplete finding because we know that at all levels of society people are participating formally and informally in groups and on an individual basis. Relying on the traditional assumptions about urban living does not serve Putnam’s argument well. Many studies of urban communities have demonstrated cohesiveness and stability. If there are changes specifically related to a certain type of community, they may have less to do with whether or not it is urban, suburban, or rural and more to do with demographics, public policy decisions, and investment patterns.

Putnam and Etzioni may need to reexamine their positions to reflect the fact that America is not a homogenous, class, gender and race-neutral society. Attempts should be made to explore beyond the surface to find out what is going on in terms of commitment and participation at different levels of civil society. Etzioni and Putnam, although they are not the only ones, do not acknowledge the possibility of a strong civil society consisting of ‘pockets of community’ with increasing social capital. They may need to redefine the way they operationalize decline in civil society or acknowledge that their findings are based upon a macrolevel analysis of civil society and community life and as a result, there may be some limitations to the arguments and their generalizability.

Researchers Frank Riessman and Erik Banks (1996) are among those who raise counterarguments to the Putnam and Etzioni analyses. Reissman and Banks argue that the new civil society has smaller groups rather than the mass associations that Putnam uses as one of the indicators for the decline in civil society. This means that alternative institutions and organizational structures are being created in response to changing needs and demands. These groups, according to Riessman and Banks, offer an opportunity for “members to tolerate
differences of opinions, listen and perhaps research understanding through the medium of personal face-to-face contact” (1996:3). What this suggests is that Putnam and other researchers who are concerned about the lack of associations or a decline in civic participation, should look at those areas in which participation is occurring to see whether or not a transformation is underway in terms of the types of activities and organizations or a decline in associations and associational relationships all together.

Skocpol (1996) believes that Putnam is right about the decline in associational relations but that he has based his arguments on individualist and localist premises. She argues that associations decline for reasons other than individuals. For example, the lack of leadership or the association not appealing to the needs or desires of a particular group or constituency may be among the reasons. Skocpol also raises the issues of privilege and elitism as part of the Putnam and Etzioni social commentaries. She points out that neither one of the researchers discuss privilege or elitism nor do they acknowledge the possibility that these biases may be potential limitations of their data analysis and subsequent theoretical approach to real-world situations and circumstances. What seems to be clear is that the limitations or the narrowness of some of the arguments of Putnam and Etzioni are not solely based upon their race or positionality. The manner and the extent to which the researchers address the issue of race, in terms of their respective research analyses, represent a limitation in their findings. They also do not address the class, gender, occupational and rural-urban complexities of contemporary life. Therefore, it does not matter whether or not they are white researchers discussing the problem. Even within their own racial group there are areas where community and social networks exist and social responsibility is as much a part of everyday living as anything else.
Community transformed

Community change occurs as the result of a number of factors. For example, natural disasters, public policy decisions, economic, social and cultural systems cause communities to change. There are certain public policy issues that can lead to changes in a community. For example, zoning, deteriorating institutions and crime all have been found to change a community. Crime and drugs combined with joblessness and hopelessness are powerful transformational forces in any community. They affect families, schools, businesses, and churches.\textsuperscript{4} With crime comes fear and fear is an extremely effective catalyst for change in an area.

Many sociological models address the phenomena of community and society at the macrolevel. That is, they explore human relationships and the social construction of community at the broader level of society by looking at structures, particularly economic structures, to explain social phenomena. One of the underlying assumptions in the decline of civil society analysis is that technological transformations directly impact, if not determine, the nature or quality of communal relationships, values, traditions, morals, and mores. As a macroanalytical model, the microlevel or the subjective interpretations of individuals are not the focus of the analysis. There are some limitations to an argument using economic structures and influences as the primary intervening variable in the nature and substance of community. One of them is the dichotomy between community and people (as mediated by the economy). In this model, there is an implicit assumption that individuals cannot, through

\textsuperscript{4} There was a time when a church was a respected and ‘safe’ place. That is no longer the case. During a funeral service in RC’s city, rival gang members came into the church seeking out the deceased member’s associates and violently disrupted the service.
agency, create adaptive models of interaction within the associated economic, political, and social orders. In their respective social commentaries, Putnam (1992, 1993, 1995, 1996) and Etzioni (1994) do not discuss the impact of economic institutions or the logic of the capitalist system on the social system. The rise in contingent labor and supranational corporations undermines all social institutions.

Microlevel models reflect adaptations to the alienation or limitations individuals feel are imposed upon them through the pressures of macrolevel forces. From this research, we see there are adaptations at the microlevel. Individuals incorporate community in their organizational cultures and missions, daily interactions with co-workers and clients, and the choices that they make about employment or volunteer activities. These adaptations have implications for all of the macrolevel pressures and structures that mediate those relationships, including the economic structural forces.

Schwirian (1983) explores the characteristics and the basis for changes in neighborhoods.

The basic elements of a neighborhood are: people, place, interaction system, shared identification, and public symbols. Putting the elements together, I define a neighborhood as a population residing in an identifiable section of a city whose members are organized into a general interaction network of formal and informal ties and express their common identification with the area in public symbols. From the broader perspective any change in people, place, interaction system, shared identification, or public symbols represents a type of neighborhood change (Schwirian, 1983:84).

The author focuses exclusively on urban areas but rural areas are undergoing redevelopment and may exhibit similar types of transformations and changes. For example, land and abandoned farms in some rural areas of Upstate and Central New York are being sold for commercial and residential development to investors, higher income homeowners, or religious communities such as Quakers and Mennonites. What is interesting in these cases is that each
group is a closed community. The boundary for membership in one is income (and possibly race) and the other is religion. Therefore, individuals in rural communities undergoing redevelopment will find themselves being excluded whereas before they were part of those communities by virtue of race and length of time in the community.

Under certain circumstances, a neighborhood with a thriving economy, active neighborhood organizations and participation, solid institutions such as theatres, churches, schools, local government, banks, retail and grocery stores can experience decline. The infrastructure changes so you may not see the nice sidewalks or nicely paved streets. Litter and other types of debris may be found. Oftentimes, illegal activities are conducted in public without regard or concern for legal repercussions. At a certain point, people may be held hostage by circumstances and conditions. In those instances, the people seem to accept what is happening and some may convince themselves that there is nothing they can do. The community members feel powerless to effect any changes in their community. Why? Because the people “who matter” (i.e., make the decisions and control distribution of resources) do not care about them; or, they are tired of pushing for change and nothing seems to ever happen. Throughout countless neighborhoods and communities many people feel nothing they do will make a difference and have reluctantly resigned themselves to their circumstances. If a major employer reduces its workforce or if it relocates to another part of the city or to another state, although increasingly overseas, the economic impacts are the first effects seen. Unfortunately, the economic impacts have a ripple effect in other areas of community life.

Schwirian states that in the literature there are generally two classic perspectives about the way in which the neighborhood changes, invasion-succession and a neighborhood lifecycle (1983:89). He feels that rather than apply one theory or another, analysts should consider
combining these theories. The invasion-succession model focuses on the racial and ethnic in- and out- migration that sometimes occurs in the neighborhood. The thesis is that as members of one group move into an area, another group leaves. This is ultimately a racial and class analysis although it is not presented as such. Its general applicability may no longer be possible because not every neighborhood provides the flexibility or opportunities for individuals to make those kinds of choices. The invasion-succession model is also based upon a social interaction paradigm in which conflict and competition are the primary driving forces or influences on social interaction among members.

Park (1952) viewed competition, conflict, and accommodation as natural processes characterizing the relationships among different populations. From this perspective the invasion of a natural area by socially or racially different individuals is met with resistance. Competition for housing may be turned into conflict as the locals and newcomers attempt to devise strategies to best each other. If some accommodation between the two populations is not reached, one of the two groups will withdraw. If the newcomers withdraw, the invasion has been halted. If the established population withdraws, their departure coupled with the continued arrival of the new group will result in succession (Schirian, 1983:89).

This model of social interaction may be applicable in some communities. Two contemporary examples of the invasion-succession model are the gated community and gentrification. In the past, members would engage in physical flight, now they simply barricade themselves and experience a false consciousness of safety, status, distance, and separateness. The communitarians, Putnam, and other social commentators do not cite this phenomenon as undermining civil society.

What appears to be absent from the invasion-succession model of community change is a discussion about the role played by the local institutions that choose to support or oppose this type of social process. It is clear that local, state and federal governmental institutions promulgate laws or policies that allow or prohibit certain behaviors. Insurance companies, banks and other lending institutions engage in redlining. Real estate agents are known for
steering. There is also no mention of the real estate, financial and media mechanisms that have to participate in the process to support the actions of the groups supposedly in conflict. This leads to the political economy theory of neighborhood change. “The political economy approach views community change in terms of the complex linkages among economic political institutions and the various segments of the business and housing markets” (Schwirian, 1983:94). As we see a renaissance of communities around the country or more tragically communities devastated by natural disasters, or the mortgage and housing crises, residential patterns may defy the assumption of the invasion-succession model.

Some of the causes of community change the interviewees identify include local land use policies, federal and state infrastructure and programmatic funding changes, and the capacity of institutions to meet the needs of various constituencies as some of the causes of community change. The Lifecycle model seems more applicable to communities because it allows for change and transformation to occur as the result of a number of factors or influences. This acknowledges that neighborhoods undergo a number of stages of development. The changes are not necessarily linear, however, they are successive. The causes of change include the social and interactional dimensions of the invasion-succession theory. However, it does not rely upon a racialized analysis of neighborhood change. It recognizes the effects of political, economic, demographic, and community infrastructure on the evolution of a neighborhood.

Institutional actions affect community and institutional changes affect personal behaviors. Financial and insurance institutional practices related to mortgage lending and property insurance can impact the stability of a community. In addition to economic and
social institutions impacting a community, there are the associated impacts of politics and political institutions. Public policy decisions can lead to neighborhood redevelopment at the cost of losing a community. VJ in her interview describes the experience of the loss of a long-time community in the city where she lives.

Lacking power in the political sphere, for example, directly influence the condition, stability, and cohesion of a community. Power dynamics and power differentials impact community member participation and progress. In areas where there are identifiably black, ethnic or low-income groups, the institutional and broader community perceptions of the members’ political power or influence, can make it difficult for elected officials and other policy-makers to implement policies intended to fairly and equitably redistribute financial resources and municipal services. Lack of property ownership and businesses helps to perpetuate the ongoing and potentially crippling situation of marginalization.

Another cause of change is the internalization of the economic system, its principles of competition, and its values. Once the economic construct of competition permeates microlevel interactions it can become destructive. Individualism and materialism are linked. To some, competition may be a sound economic and business model. However, it becomes problematic when it invades our society and becomes an American value defining the nature, types, even the basis of a significant portion of our personal relationships. When this occurs, it undermines our society and can become a factor in the decline of civil society and is an obstacle to the creation and perpetuation of society and social capital.
CHAPTER TWO
METHODOLOGY

The main goal of exploratory research is the production of inductively derived generalizations about the group, process, activity, or situation under study. Next, the researcher weaves these generalizations into a grounded theory explaining the object of study (Stebbins, 2001:6).

This is an exploratory research project the results of which are based upon the analysis of 24 in-depth interviews with adults who self-identify as African Americans. The interviewees reside in the cities of Boston, Syracuse and Washington, D.C. The interviews were conducted between the years 2000-2006. Future research plans are to use these findings as the basis for a much larger project exploring the ways in which community is socially constructed, culturally interpreted, and adapted to meet the needs of different racial, ethnic and cultural groups in the United States.

The exploration of the intersection of race, racism, and community is not a specific research focus of this study. However, at one point, the issue did come up during the research design phase and a set of ‘racialized’ questions was prepared. Essentially, I took the general interview questions and asked the interviewees to consider their responses from the perspective of being African American. These racialized questions were included in three of the interviews. However, I did discuss the racialized questions with ten of the participants. During those interviews, the questions were asked after the interviewees responded to the general questions. For example, “How do you define community?” and then, “Does being African American affect how you define community?”

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5 The delay in completing the interviews was the result of a number of factors including, change in study population, lack of funds, and limited access to potential interviewees. I do not believe the research findings
Footnote continued on the next page.
When I imposed ‘race’ on the interview and included the racialized questions in the set of interview questions, the responses of the participants fell into three categories. First, the majority of the interviewees expressed offense to the questions and also felt that they were being treated as the “Other.” Second, some interviewee responses were related to the experience of racism and not community. Therefore, I decided not to continue asking them. However, any direct or indirect references to race and community become part of the interview narrative and where appropriate, are included in the narrative analysis. Third, the interviewees expressed concerns that their feelings about the questions and my decision not to ask the questions would somehow jeopardize my obtaining my degree. Rather than see that happen, the interviewees said they would answer the questions anyway. I assured them their concerns were unfounded.

During the interview, some of the interviewees explicitly discuss community and being African American. In those situations, the connection between community and being African American is made in a number of ways. Among them are identity, history, culture, vocation, avocation, and motivation. With others the reference is more subtle and implicit in the definitions of community, membership, and the experience of community in the interviewees’ everyday lives. This means that for the most part, the interviewees did not mention race directly but as they talked about childhood and contemporary experiences of community, for example, it is clear that race culture are at the intersection of community, socialization, and internalization.

are affected by the delay because the respondents talk about community as being a part of who they are and how they choose to live their lives.
Research design

Community theories and subsequent analyses address epistemological and ontological questions. Research designed to investigate community reflects the researcher’s assumptions about the contexts and conditions under which individuals or groups relate to others and how they understand roles and responsibilities. The primary goal of this study is to obtain sufficient baseline data to enable me to develop a rudimentary understanding of the interviewees’ ontological experiences of community. There are no preconceived ideas about the nature or quality of the participants’ community experiences. However, I did approach the research with an assumption that the data are being derived from the socially constructed and personal realities of the interviewees.

This is not a community-centric study (Stein, 1960) or case study looking at social, political, or economic institutions of a specific group or neighborhood. It is a study of individuals and their expression and understanding of community. Their narratives give us a public and private view of community. The interviews are rich with meanings and symbols giving us access to a group of people who think deeply about community and its fundamental connection to identity, self-worth, positionality (Smith, 1990), sociality and relationship to and with the outside world.

Riessman says, “We cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret. Representational decisions cannot be avoided; they enter at numerous points in the research process, and qualitative analysts including feminists must confront them” (1993:8). I am not “giving voice” to the people who participate in the study. The narratives demonstrate that the participants already have their voices. The ideas and perspectives of different community members are missing in the research on the decline of civil society.
This essay includes other community members in the conversation about community and the decline of civil society. Efforts to be as inclusive or representative as possible and practicable help to ensure the integrity and the richness of the analyses and interpretations we as researchers make.

Methodology

As valuable as [...] quantitative studies might be, something crucial is missing. My view is that to really understand a human experience, it must be appreciated from the subjective point of view of the person undergoing it. To use the language of social psychology, it is necessary to ‘take the role’ of those whose behaviors and feelings we want to fathom. Underneath the rates, correlations, and presumed causes of behavior are real human beings who are trying to make sense of their lives (Karp, 1996:11).

The selection of an appropriate data collection tool required clarity about the research subject. “[...][Q]ualitative methodology advocates an approach to examining the empirical social world which requires the researcher to interpret the real world from the perspective of the subjects of his investigation” (Filstead, 1970:7). A triangulated approach consisting of interviews, focus groups, and surveys (in-person and telephone) was considered. In the end, the decision was made to collect the data through semi-structured interviews. This qualitative and interpretive strategy is appropriate for capturing the personal meanings and interpretations people have for social phenomena, including experiences of community (DeVault, 1991; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994; Rubin, 1976; Stack, 1975, 1996; Karp, 1996).

Study Sample

The interviewees range in age from 19 to 68. They work in different occupations and are in various stages of their lifecycles. Twenty of the interviewees live in Boston, three live in Syracuse and one interviewee lives in Washington, D.C. All of the participants are self-
identified African Americans. This is also a requirement for participating in the study.\(^6\)

Perceptions of self are the fundamental and foundational inputs for this research. Part of that experience is how they choose to identify themselves racially, ethnically and, or culturally. These identities help shape the people the interviewees are and how they construct the meanings of their experiences in the world.

Several strategies are used to identify individuals to participate in this study. I spoke to family and friends seeking their participation and suggestions for individuals to contact. I attended a community event and handed out information about the project, gave people my contact information, and left a sign-up sheet for people who were interested but wanted more information. I also approached staff of several community-based organizations in Boston and Syracuse. I contacted managers of local grocery stores and the public transit authority in Boston and requested permission to hand out flyers and administer a survey. In the end, my personal and professional networks allowed me to construct a snowball sample comprised of twenty-four individuals who, in effect, self-selected to participate in the study.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and interpretation are based upon an inductive approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This allows the theory to evolve and emerge from the data. If exploration and discovery are going to be successful, it is important to ensure that the thoughts, words and meanings of the participants serve as the guides for data analysis and theory construction.

\(^6\) The identification is African American and not Black. This was a conscious decision because “Black” includes individuals who are not African Americans. VJ interprets community from the African American perspective while at the same time acknowledging the influences of her family’s Caribbean roots.
Margaret Sherrard Sherraden and Rossana E. Barrera state in their article about conducting qualitative research with understudied populations that “analysis begins the day of the first interview” (1995:465). Whether or not the study populations are subjects of many or a limited number of studies, the approach should be the same. African Americans are not an understudied population, but their ontological definitions and phenomenological experiences of community have not been studied in this way in the past.

The research design and data collection methods are in keeping with Sherradan’s and Barrera’s recommendation for conducting qualitative research. From the first interview to the last, I consider the emerging concepts and themes in terms of previous and current research, public debates and issues. Specifically, whether or not the responses support or contradict findings from previous research or the responses of other participants in the study, and the ways in which the interviewees’ responses converge or diverge from some of the assumptions about social interaction and community discussed in the literature.

Consistent data collection is important. The research questions are asked in a standardized manner to ensure that each interviewee is asked the same set of questions and in the exact same order. Jean Peneff (1988) in his study of French survey workers found that researchers reinterpret and are selective in the implementation of the research protocols. I was consistent in the administration of the interview schedule but allowed some flexibility during the actual interview to increase the likelihood of different themes and ideas emerging. For example, when I ask an interviewee a specific question, the response often includes their thoughts on topics that are the subjects of other questions. I record the comments and during the coding and data analysis stages of the project, organize the interview responses according to the question asked, not the topic discussed.
All of the interviews are tape recorded, transcribed, and then formatted for HyperResearch, a qualitative data analysis application. I selected this application because of my previous experience of working with it and its ease of use. The software makes it easy to organize, store, retrieve and analyze coded materials. Once formatted, I systematically code the transcribed interviews. The emerging themes serve as the organizing frames for this essay.

Primary data collection technique

The semi-structured interview is the primary data collection technique. “[… Semi-structured interviewing] has much of the freewheeling quality of unstructured interviewing, and requires all the same skills, but semi-structured interviewing is based upon the use of an interview guide” (Bernard, 1995:209). This data collection technique provides the flexibility to capture the interviewee’s stream of consciousness while at the same time providing enough structure to ensure consistent data collection.

A limitation of using the interview as the only data collection tool is that there is no way to determine how the perceptions of community relate to specific acts of community (i.e., types of activities, frequency of participation or significance of an activity to the member). I considered administering a short survey as a way of collecting this data, as well as other supplemental data and determined that this type of comparison is not within the scope of the study. However, it is important data to collect. In a subsequent study, I would like to administer a survey and use the results as the basis for conducting a follow up or clarifying interview. It will be important to avoid any appearance of judgment and criticism if there are differences between what the interviewees express as their feelings and expectations regarding community participation and what they actually do.
Secondary data collection

I use participant-observation, information from prior research on community and African Americans and economic development to obtain supplemental data for this research project. These secondary data sources provide additional depth and perspective to the data analysis. The role of participant-observer is very personal because it combines the private and public spheres of my life. For over 30 years, I have worked in community-based organizations with missions to serve and strengthen a community, volunteered with different groups on projects, and participated in community organizing and empowerment activities. For two years, I worked for a private philanthropic organization that funded a neighborhood initiative to build the capacity (assets and social capital) of a predominantly African American neighborhood. From the outside, the neighborhood appears to be dysfunctional and disorganized (i.e., lacking in community spirit and adequate social capital). However, in my role as advisor to residents and neighborhood groups I identified a number of groups and individuals who consistently develop projects and sponsor events to support the community. One of the things I learned from the experience is that community members will participate in activities they believe will result in positive outcomes for their communities and families. I approached a number of individuals in Boston and Syracuse to participate in this study and they spoke to me about being tired of the struggle and their desire for others to take up the charge. People want to volunteer on projects; what they sometimes lack is information on where and how they can participate. Not everyone is a project organizer but a person will be available when needed. In fact, I found these community volunteers were the ones who kept organizers on their ‘toes’ and on schedule to implement projects.
More importantly, and what is not easily quantifiable, is the informal community sharing and civic engagement occurring among neighbors. Neighbors help each other by sharing information on programs. They assist with childcare and, if necessary, adult daycare. Many offer rides to appointments or shopping. They keep each other company and help with house cleaning and other chores. They also help each other financially. Carol Stack’s (1975) work on kinship and social networks demonstrates the importance of these informal volunteering and community membership activities to the sustainability of communities. The nature and dynamics of these exchange relationships are not analyzed in the decline of civil society discussions. Social commentators do little more than make reference to informal relationships.

The combination of the insularity of a community and the introduction of an outsider can bring to the surface deep-seated rivalries. When this occurs it becomes difficult, though not impossible, to bring individuals together to accomplish community work. Finally, just as the researcher can influence outcomes, the actions of an outside entity can change power dynamics, create opportunities within the community while at the same undermining the altruistic motives of many community members.

Interview schedule

The questions for the semi-structured interviews are based upon the main themes from the sociological literature and decline of civil society debates. There are three broad categories for the questions: (1) Perceptions, (2) Social Connectedness, and (3) Core Values. Perceptions are community definitions, interpretation and understanding of the meanings of community, the process of learning community, and the transformation of community. Social Connectedness is the expression and experience of community, types of civic engagement,
community associations and memberships, types of communities an individual belongs to, and the reasons for those memberships. *Core Values* are related to the responsibility or obligation of members and the community and boundaries of community. The following table shows the relationship between the interview questions and these broad categories.

**Table 1**

**Interview Question Dimensions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions</th>
<th>Social Connectedness</th>
<th>Core Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you define community?</td>
<td>How is your definition of community expressed in your personal life? Professional life?</td>
<td>What is a member's responsibility to the community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What need or needs does community meet in people’s lives?</td>
<td>How many communities do you belong to?</td>
<td>What is the community's responsibility to its members?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a need that community meets in your life?</td>
<td>Do you believe there is a crisis of community spirit or attitudes?</td>
<td>What is the basis of membership in a community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What institutions are part of a community?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you could describe your ideal community, what would it be?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would it feel like? What institutions would it have?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes a strong community?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think people learn about community?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you learn about community?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has community changed for you over time?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe there is a crisis in community institutions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe there is a crisis of community spirit and attitudes?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis begins with the interviews. Four interviews are conducted over the telephone and each lasted 50-60 minutes. The remaining twenty interviews are conducted in
person and 60-90 minutes in length. All of the interviews were recorded. During the interview, I listen for threads or dimensions of the individual’s personality, family background, and community activities as an initial starting point. If an interviewee introduces an interesting theme or comment, I explore the idea further. The semi-structured nature of the interview and the personal interviewing style I use to conduct the interviews facilitate the development of new themes and collection of additional data.

Transcribed responses to each of the questions are aggregated, thematically coded, and analyzed. “Analyses of meanings often center on the questions of how members define for themselves a given problematic topic. That which is seen as problematic may be so defined by the observer, the members, or both” (Lazarsfeld, 1972:28). The analysis of the meanings of community and civic responsibility is at the heart of this research project. In the literature, the perspective of the everyday person’s views on community, and the decline of civil society in particular, do not appear to be part of an organized research agenda. This is a limitation of some of the commentaries on the decline of civil society.

Presentation of the Data

I considered presenting the findings in the form of case studies by selecting ‘ideal’ types and then using the complete interview for the analysis. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot’s book, I’ve Known Rivers, is an example of the successful presentation of complete narratives. Her analysis of the data allows us to shorten the distance between the storytellers and their narratives. For my purposes, the development and analysis of themes is made easier by combining interviewee responses to each question.

In Worlds of Pain, Lillian Rubin’s book based upon her intensive interviews with fifty white, working-class families she incorporates significant amounts of the interview data in her
analysis. She uses the data to illuminate the experiences of the families, not to explain her theories or hypotheses regarding working-class white families. Like her study, this study’s research findings do not determine what community means nor do they explain the boundaries of community, its members, its responsibility to members or its members’ responsibility to it. On their own, these findings cannot be used to create a theoretical model of community members’ attitudes and behaviors in contemporary society. They do not predict behaviors. However, they do add to the current body of knowledge about community. The findings are an additional lens to view the phenomenon of community. Finally, they can serve as a starting point for subsequent research on the acts and expressions of community among different groups in the United States, not just African Americans.

Potential Limits of the Research

Despite the rigorousness of this research process, there still remains the possibility of certain biases and limits of the study. This section discusses the study sample, interview process, influence of the researcher, and replicability and generalizability of the data and research findings.

Study sample

Assuming we accept the proposition in the decline of civil society commentary that the decline in civic participation and engagement is due, in part to the “generational effect” (Putnam, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996; Sullivan, 1996), the composition of the sample represents a potential limitation of the research. There is a mix of genders but not a full range of ages or generations. At the time the study was conducted, the youngest person was 19 and the oldest in her sixties. It is of interest that these two participants share similar values and attitudes
about community. There are enough differences in the backgrounds and life experiences of the participants to minimize the effects of age and, or generation as potential intervening variables.

Another possible limitation is the knowledge and awareness of community the interviewees already possess. Preconceived ideas of community or active engagement in civic activities are not selection criteria for participation. In fact, with the exception of my aunt LS, I had never had conversations with any of the interviewees about community. The only criterion for participation is the self-identification as African American. I am not aware of this being a factor in the interviewees’ decision to participate in the study. A few of the interviewees state that participation in this study is itself an act of community because they feel that by helping me, and it makes no difference whether or not I am a stranger or a friend to them, they are helping a member of their community. They also feel that the data collected and analyzed will be used in a positive way to effect change and lead to positive outcomes and impacts in their respective communities.

Interview Process

Another possible limitation is what Dijkstra (1987) refers to as the response effect. This means that certain dynamics such as race and gender may come into play during an interview and influence an interviewee’s responses. This type of bias is not a part of the study. However, I believe that my race gave me legitimacy and the topic and nature of the research was of interest so I did not sense distrust as sometimes happens when the Subject and the Researcher are very different.

Prior history with some of the interviewees did not appear to influence the interview dynamics or the honesty of the responses. My role of researcher created an imbalance in the power dynamics of the interview. To minimize its effects, I assure the interviewees that I see
them as the experts on their life experiences and that I want to hear what they have to say about those experiences, not tell them what or how they should feel.

Sherraden and Barrera believe it is important for interviewees to feel they are in control of the interview. “In other words, especially in research that explores respondents’ perspectives, participants should be able to initiate and guide the conversation in directions that they think are important” (1995:461). My interviewing style is conducive to engendering that sense of empowerment. The interviewees appear to feel comfortable talking about the different topics, themes or issues they feel are relevant to the research project.

**Researcher**

My own subjectivity becomes as much a part of the research process as the interview questions through which the interviewees channel and analyze their worldviews. More specifically, it serves as the foundation upon which I choose to pursue this research academically, professionally, and personally. As a result, this research project and process are a function of my personal and professional interests and experiences of community.

I embrace community as a fundamental and guiding principle in my life and do so for the following reasons: 1) I strongly identify as a human being who is labeled by society as an African American; 2) I experience comfort and a sense of the familiar when I am in an environment where I can see (often only occasionally) people who look like me; and 3) My personal history and the religious tradition I try to live my life by are founded on a belief in civic responsibility and obligation.

**Replicability and Generalizability**

While this is an exploratory study, it still must past the tests of replicability and generalizability. Susan Weller and A. Kimball Romney write, “[c]ontent validity answers the
simple question, ‘Does the test (or interview schedule) make sense?’ (1988:79). The interview schedule consists of questions based upon themes, issues or topics found in the literature from different social science disciplines and current debates about the decline of civil society. The questions are straightforward and elicit answers that respond to them. Therefore, the test in this case, the interview schedule makes sense and is designed to be an effective tool to capture valid data for analysis.

In terms of replicability, David Armstrong et. al. conducted a study on inter-rater reliability in qualitative research. They found “... there is indeed a degree of consensus in the identification of themes between the different analyses but that the ‘packaging’ of these themes showed a number of different configurations” (1997:604). The relevance of Armstrong’s research findings for this study is that another researcher can replicate this project and, at a minimum, will be able to identify similar thematic concepts.

The presentation and representation of another researcher’s study findings may differ from this study but any differences are likely to be stylistic as opposed to substantive from an analytical standpoint. The research findings presented in this essay provide enough baseline data to allow any researcher to replicate this study or develop a research hypothesis that can empirically test individuals and their feelings about community, its institutions, and the role that community plays in their lives. This is one of the reasons that community is such an important subject of research. The subject is discussed in different media types, but more importantly, as part of informal and formal discussions about the condition of contemporary society and the changes that individuals have seen over time. Both in terms of what they see happening in the public sphere as well as the private sphere of their lives.
The findings from this research are relevant and generalizable to other self-identifying African Americans because of the universality of the experience of community by any individual who is not isolated or set apart from routine social interactions. The discussions and interpretations of community by members of the two graduate school courses were similar to the thoughts, feelings, and meanings mentioned by the study participants during their interviews. More specifically, the study results are relevant to the experiences of African Americans because the themes identified from the research are derived from interviews with individuals from two different metropolitan areas. Although a larger percent of the participants resided in one of the cities. Prior research and my participant-observation experience confirm that the study participants’ articulated perceptions of community are not anomalies. The experiences of community are specific to the individual, however, because of the socially constructed nature of community the interpretations are not solely dependent upon the individual. The reason for this is that interpretations and experiences of community are a function of the transactions that occur at the intersections of the public and private spheres of an individual’s life. Individuals affect other individuals; institutions affect other institutions; individuals and institutions affect each other. The observations of and perceptions about the decline of civil society are often the result of the ‘hidden’ dynamics of formal and informal transactions between individuals and institutions – in both the private and public realm of everyday life.

The participants in this study are storytellers. Telling us of their families, friends, neighborhoods, and the communities to which they belong. This essay is a synthesis of some of their stories about acts and expressions of community. As they expressed their thoughts, it became clear to me that community and civil engagement are highly personal. Yet they choose
to share personal information knowing that it will be presented in a public (and permanent way). Each participant was assured their information would be combined with the others to ensure their privacy and confidentiality.

In the next chapter, Expressions of Community, we explore the socially constructed nature of community by analyzing some of the study participants’ definitions of community. Individuals use definitions of community to help identify, for example, community members and non-members, make decisions about employment, housing, social activities, civic engagement, and volunteerism. These definitions provide a general framework through which community members and non-members develop and create social networks, internalize, replicate, and transmit values, expectations, and mores about participation and civic engagement in a community.
CHAPTER THREE
EXPRESSIONS OF COMMUNITY

The main themes discussed in this chapter are community as a system of survival, community as family and kinship, community as a partnership between people, community as place, and community as institutions. The first three themes are specifically related to an individual’s social connectedness and associational relationships. These definitions reflect the participants’ internal processing or the ontological and phenomenological interpretations of community. The last two themes, place and institutions, address physical aspects and some of the component parts of a community. The selected text from the narratives reveals the ways people intimately connect community to their personal and private lives while at the same time relating it to a larger and broader social context.

The interviewees’ definitions of community include specific references to physical, demographic, social, and institutional characteristics. Most of the definitions are related to a social-psychological connection between the self and others. Community is defined as a place of belonging, nurturing, and support. It is within community that there is kinship, acceptance, and a place of psychological security.

There are as many definitions of community in the literature as there are with the interviewees. For example, George C. Hillery, Jr. (1955) conducted a study in which he found more than seventy (70) different references (definitions) in the literature. The coded interview responses to the question, “How do you define community?” resulted in over eighty (80) different themes. Some of the interviewees describe community as concrete and physical such as a geographical area with boundaries. Others describe community in social-psychological terms. For example, community is described as a sense of belonging, a place that can make
living easier, is a mentality or outlook or attitude; it enables its members to learn the world; it is personal, comfortable, and makes us unique. What is interesting is that the interviewees offer multiple definitions of community and these definitions are used to guide the choices individuals make relative to employment, friendships, civic engagement, and participation.

JE and JF are two participants who acknowledge the fact that multiple communities are a part of most people’s lives. For example, church, school, family, work, and professional organizations represent some of the common communities of the participants as well as individuals in general. JE believes there are many communities and suggests that communities define themselves, including roles and responsibilities. He says,

JE Generally, what community means to me? Um, community is – God, that’s actually tough. Community is the – (inaudible) community to me is this collection of people and, um, businesses that encompass any geographical area like what you’re close to, so my community is near my home, my community is where I work, ah, and my community is my friends and family. It’s a combination of those things. ... [S]ocially—that becomes community. Where you personalize, where you work and play as part of your community. And sometimes they’re all in the same place geographically and sometimes it’s spread [out]. You become part of several communities. So for me there’s no – I can’t break them up. But for me community is all those things encompassed in, in one person, the community that I belong to.

As individuals we possess internal and often unarticulated definitions of community that we operationalize in our everyday lives. We, like many of the study participants, rely upon these definitions to help us navigate the personal and professional spheres of our lives.

Community as a system of survival

Community definitions are the values, guideposts, or signs by which we navigate our lives. For the majority of the interviewees, community implicitly is a system of survival. As a system of survival, community provides a place of refuge and reaffirmation and is grounded in the interviewees’ experiences of being African American in the United States. When the interviewees discuss community as a system of survival, there is a clear connection between
race, racism, and the experience of discrimination. Community sustains and re-energizes them so that they can go back out into a world that sees them as something different and set apart.

One of the interviewees, KW, discusses a perspective on community that stems from his identification as African American and being male. In fact, he speaks quite openly and earnestly about his views of community and how the media project he is working on reflects community and the values that come out of that experience. KW’s definition of community is based upon what he sees as lacking in the African American community, individually and collectively. In many ways he is lamenting what he perceives as the decline or loss of community among African Americans. AH and RG discuss something similar in their interviews.

KW Um, well, it’s called [the Seven Principles] network. Are seven, seven uh it’s a value system in which um in order for African Americans to survive in this country under the, the, the cloak of racism. It’s a, it’s a method, it’s a system that I believe, that I know will, you know, help black people to survive. Um, so the purpose of the show is to exercise these seven principles and get people to think about them and to act with these values in order, and to demonstrate on TV in a practical sense that these, if you use this system then we can get out of economic malaise. Not only economic, but spiritual malaise that you know that exists now in Black America – the African American community.

KW’s television show is a countermeasure to the indifference or lack of action he feels is pervasive throughout the African American community. He is disappointed in what he sees as the inability of African Americans to maintain their values and make significant achievements and contributions to their community in the way other groups are doing. For example, he talks about the success of the West Indian community in maintaining values, sticking together and collectively working to sustain itself.

KW’s television show is based upon the principles of faith, unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, collective economics, purpose, and creativity. These seven principles are also the principles for Kwanzaa. KW lives his life by these principles.
VJ, the Director of Counseling at a homeless family shelter, talks about community in terms of personal experience. She helps us relate to her definition by recounting a time when her African American community and experience are missing. In the following excerpt she is describing what it is like to be away from your home community, living and working as a minority among a majority.

VJ I think, for me, I think I understood it most when it was missing. When I was in a situation where I did not see or feel a sense of community. And I did not feel part of the group or geographic location which I happened to be in at that time. You know, there was no connectedness. There were no like values. There were no -- You know, and I really saw that I was operating on, for want of a better term, a different wavelength from the, from other people who were there. And, stepping back into my community, that's where I felt my sense of comfort, as you said, you know, my sense of, you know, being able to exhale. You know, to breathe, you know. And saying, yeah, you know, I know I am, I'm not, I'm not, you know, crazy or off my rocker for thinking this way. This is who I am. These are my values. And, um, you know, stepping into a place where the, the, the worldview and the value system is totally different from anything you've experienced or even want to experience. You know, that's when you sort of notice it the most.

VJ’s narrative describes the ontological and psychological aspects of community in her life. The absence of shared values and a real connection with the individuals in her environment was difficult. The manner in which she contrasts the experience of being ‘in’ and ‘out’ of community provides us with a clear sense of the role community plays, as well as some of the needs that community meets in her life.

When JE discusses the relationship between being African American and community, he first explains that as he thinks about community there is no direct or specific connection between race and community. However, he does discuss being African American in terms of survival. JE relates the Irish, Italian, and African American community experience to each other, he points to the universal nature of community. Community as a universal experience is absent from the work of Putnam and other social commentators.
JE  So, even as an African American, our sense of community happens to base itself around survival (inaudible) and understanding. So if I look at it from the perspective of friends and family and neighbors that that is a draw, a magnet for us to be able to, um, sustain ourselves as minorities. So a minority community is based – any other minority community whether it’s a Irish community or whether it’s an Italian community – it’s based around the fact that there’s common interest and common cultural, um, cultural comforts.

Few of the participants speak so directly about community as a mechanism for surviving and functioning in the world. Yet, from the narratives it is clear that part of what sustains and strengthens each of them as they go about their lives and participate in their respective communities is this role of community as a source of support, nurturing, affirmation, and stabilization.

Community as family and kinship

Um, community means, um, it’s a sense of kinship, and just not so much, you know, with family members, but, um, you know, people that you decide to have, you know, in your family, and who you choose to have as family members. So, those people make up your community, and, for me, "you’re family." So, that's, you know, my definition of what community means to me, and sort of how I would define it. PM, female

Family is both a symbol and a metaphor for community. For the majority of the participants it ranks number one in the hierarchy of community. Robert Nisbet makes a similar connection between community and family when he writes, “Its [community’s] archetype, both historically and symbolically, is the family, and in almost every type of genuine community the nomenclature of family is prominent” (1996:48). Community as family and kinship is a recurring theme or symbol for the participants. It is both biological and metaphorical. Family and kinship connote connectedness and acceptance. More importantly, family can consist of unrelated persons as extended family and biologically related individuals. In terms of importance, there is no difference between the biological and extended family.
Community as a family has a sense of commitment, obligation, and reciprocity to the members.

Putnam, and those who agree with or share his perspective on the state of civil society, believes the destabilization of the family is a key element in the decline of civil society. They believe that mothers working outside of the have contributed significantly to the erosion of social capital in civil society. This position has elements of paternalism and classism. There may be some coded, and subconscious racism, as well. It assumes that economic production is the function of males in society and social production is the function of females. This view of society harkens back to the 1950s when the expectation was that women were responsible for taking care of the home and family, while men went out to work. It also implicitly makes a judgment about the type or types of family that are or should be valued in our society.

Family in contemporary society is being redefined. However, the role, value, and function of the family have not changed. The family continues to be the primary source of socialization and value transmission in American society. LS and VB are the only interviewees to speak so directly about the changes in the African American family structure and its internal dynamics. For instance, LS makes the observation that the reason why we have a crisis of community attitudes and spirit is because young people are not learning the proper values in the home. She feels that contemporary families are not engaged in the transmission of cultural values and traditions because the parents lack the knowledge needed to develop or continue traditions of civic responsibility and participation. As a result, the children in these families are not being socialized or observing behaviors that engender a sense of commitment,
responsibility, and community engagement. VB also acknowledges changes in the family and believes they are a function of structural inequalities in education and employment.

The interviewees recognize that family is connected to community and family is community. Working mothers are not identified as one of the reasons there is a loss of social capital, a decline of community, or associational relationships. This is one of the differences between the perceptions of the study group and those of the decline of community social commentators. Choosing to be a ‘stay-at-home mom’ historically has not been an option for the majority of poor and African American women. However, VB talks about the need for a male-led society so that young black males can have role models. In his comments, VB tries to avoid denigrating or being disrespectful of African American women, while at the same time honestly talking about the negative impacts and consequences of unfair hiring and other business practices on the economic self-sufficiency of African American men and ultimately African American families.

The text from VB’s interview is from his answer to the question, “What makes a strong community?” It is included in this section on community as family because it touches upon a number of serious issues facing the African American community.

VB And it would have to, and I repeat, how we in conflict -- And I have many conversations with women and it seems like men and women are at war -- you know, with each other in our community, but I really believe it would have to be the presence of strong black men [that] would make a strong community. ‘Cuz without it, [inaudible] very vulnerable.

Not that women don't do a good job, but it's just something -- I'm not trying to sound chauvinistic or nothing, but it's something about the male-led society so that the young boys can become men. Because without that, we lose a total respect for the way things should be. And now, we respect [inaudible], but, again, our traditions, you know, it is just that. And, so,

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8 I am aware that Putnam’s response to this issue has been that the changes in patterns of civic engagement and social connectedness are occurring throughout society. Therefore, he feels there is no need to discuss race. See Race, Neighborhoods, and the Misuse of Social Capital, James Jennings, 2007.
that's back to our tradition as a male-led society where everyone respects each other so that we don't have the young men warring because of the way they feel. That they need to go out in a [inaudible] of violent glory to be recognized with some respect; that you don't have to knock someone down to get respect but all you need to do is stand up. And that's how you get your respect. So, I, I think it's most important because as we look and see the deterioration and it only makes sisters have to work harder as we see they go to work on the early bus, you know.

And there's more women working than men. That's a new thing. My grandfather just passed away on January 1st this year. Part of his eulogy was that his son said, [inaudible], his son said that he'd been married to the same woman for over 40 years and she'd never worked and they always had everything they needed and then some. So he took care of the family -- and that's what made them a strong family but we see the right opportunities for women and not our men makes for a weak society -- because all the things that are projected, and they're projected in a negative light, about black men that we almost start to believe that and women start to believe it and they teach our children to believe that.

You know, now, for some [inaudible] people that's one thing, but we are in a society now where violence is just so crazy is that we don't have any respect for ourselves so it's impossible for us to respect the black woman. She has no respect for us so it's just a serious negative thing. So, I think the way to get back to a strong society -- You know, I know it's been said many times how a society treats its women -- because [inaudible] history. We can tell about how a society treats its black men and how we [inaudible] in prison populations, as well as the military. That's the only place that we're over-represented, and the military and in the prisons. You can't find us on the college campus.

The lack of males in the home, in the workplace, in educational institutions, and businesses represents a problem for the community as a whole. Statistics show that there is an overrepresentation of males in criminal justice facilities and the military. An under-representation of males in the community, means there is a significant loss of social capital.

Do we hear the echo of Putnam when VB says that his grandfather was married to the same woman for forty (40) years and she never worked outside of her home? Perhaps, but I believe it means something different in the African American context. VB's concerns are with the interpersonal relationships between men and women. He is also concerned with the epidemic of young males as victims of drug and gang-related violence. While Putnam is talking about the absence of the woman in the home, VB is speaking about the absence of the African American man in the home and more importantly, in the larger society. This is
different from the position of the decline of civil society social commentary. The argument is that the beginning of the decline of civil society and the loss of social capital began when women left their homes to go to work. VB does not fault women for going out and working because he understands that it is a necessity for most, if not all families.

DB shares a similar concern about males. When DB was growing up, his friends and he saw professional males in the neighborhood. He says because these men mentored and encouraged the young males, they were inspired to become professionals. DB achieved that goal. He and VB know all too well that many young males will neither aspire to nor will they achieve success and without the support of positive males and the larger community.

The ‘dance of the genders’ in civil society or the ‘gendered’ decline of civil society is a complex set of relationships. One that derives from and is sustained by ascribed roles and responsibilities. These roles and responsibilities have to be ontologically interpreted, internally processed and externally negotiated in and across multiple communities. There is no easy answer or simple algorithm that we as a society can use to achieve the right balance between the necessities of life and the expectations civil society has of its members. Central to the decline of civil society argument is that women are society’s source and creators of social capital. This raises an issue that has yet to be addressed by Putnam or any of the other social commentators. If women are the creators of community and social capital, what role do men play?

Martinez-Brawley (1990) might agree with Putnam that the family, as an institution, is unstable and therefore no longer able to meet the needs of individuals, however, for very different reasons. Whereas Putnam argues the decline of community is the function of the decreasing stability of family, Martinez-Brawley believes the erosion of the family is the reason
that people are turning to community. In her model of the social world, community becomes a refuge, not a casualty in the decline of civil society. Does that mean individuals who believe the changing American family is a sign or symbol of the decline of civil society or Martinez-Brawley are wrong? Are they over-exaggerating the impact of family on social capital creation and the decline of civil society? No, they are not wrong about the effects; perhaps they should be less dogmatic about what motivates individual actions and what creates or sustains community.

Eleven of the study group specifically defined community as family. The selected excerpts from the interviews of NC, EH, TJ, PD, and RC represent some of the ways in which people intimately connect community to something very personal and relate it to those things that are in the public sphere. NC is a male who works as a project leader for a school district. During the interview, NC offers five definitions of community for consideration. He identifies the family as the first and primary community. Community is (1) family and lineage, past and present, (2) friends (social connectedness, circle of friends), (3) organizations and institutions, (4) political, and (5) general public. He also includes examples to demonstrate what he means.

NC Uh, to me personally, uh, community means, first of all, family. Uh, you know, I have a daughter who lives in [a neighboring city]. I have another daughter who lives right near me with two, two of my grandkids, and stuff like that. So the, first and foremost community means, means family and family linkages, not only in the present, but also in the past. My great-grandfather fought in the [state’s Civil War regiment] and stuff like that.

And the second thing that community means to me are friends. People I went to school with, friends that I have now in fraternal groups and things like that. So community means first family, secondly friends and whether they're young, old, in-between or whatever it is.

Then the third thing that community means to me is community organizations. Uh, and that starts with the schools where I work, but it also involves -- later this evening I'll be going to an NAACP meeting at [a local community college] and to go on a nice summer
evening instead of doing some social activities, that means community. Being part of the organizations that, that make it up.

Then the fourth thing I can think about from a community standpoint is political linkages. You know all politics are local so .... So I think politics play a role in community. And then the last thing I can just say is the, the general public. [For example,] Me and my fraternity brothers yesterday served food for the homeless down [in the neighborhood], yesterday and I see that as part of it. That's what I think community is.

For NC, community is primarily personal because it includes family, friends and community service. However, he also recognizes its public dimension when he mentions schools and the NAACP as community organizations. NC captures the multidimensional nature and the complexity of community as he discusses his definitions and gives examples to help us understand what he means. He also incorporates familial, generational, and historical contexts as he talks about community. From NC’s perspective community facilitates the recollection and transmission of a collective memory of community, one that is able to bridge the past, present and future. When AH discusses community and his experiences growing up, he is also talking about a collective or social memory of community (traditions, rituals, role expectations, socialization, and social relationships) critical to the survival of communities. PD’s, DB’s, and LMB’s efforts to instill a sense of service in the younger generation within their families are perfect examples of the importance of the social memory of community.

EH also makes the connection between family and community. She says she feels this way because like a family, people in a community are there all of the time and if you need something you can count on them to be there for you. As she reflects upon her historical and contemporary experiences of community, EH says,

EH Um. Let me see. Community to me, let's see, it's kind of like family really. I like to think it's more like family. Um, I guess I just feel it's more like family because they're there all the time, and if you need something or -- because it's home, and if you don't take care of your community, then, um, then who else will? So, it's more like home to me, because when I come home, I want to feel safe; I want my children to feel safe; I want to know the people in the

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community, get to know them, they get to know me. So, if you need anything, or if they need anything, they're there or you're there to help.

Um, when I lived in [the neighborhood she lived in before she moved to where she is now], I guess I was more involved, maybe because the children were younger. Um, we had this -- We used to attend -- Like they had this police thing -- where we had, we went to the police meeting at least once a month -- and we went there and we talked to the policemen, so we got to know, um, the policemen, they got to know us. And we got to know what was going on in the community, if there [were] people who got robbed or just, just to keep up with what was going on in the community so, so we could be protectors, we could help the community, keep the community safe all at the same time.

I was always involved with the schools, and we [were] more like in the community. I guess we were more like family, cuz we got to know everybody in the community. If they needed something done -- or whatever, we all got together and we did it. You know, if it was -- You know, when it got warm, if we did cleaning up the yard -- we all went and cleaned the yards, or if somebody needed to go somewhere or whatever, we was always there, and, to me, that's what a community is, more like, more like a family.

Now that her children are grown and raising families of their own, EH is not actively involved with the neighbors in her community (now, geographically determined). Over time, her definition of community changed. About community in her life today she says,

EH I, I guess I would say it's more, more of a -- I think it's more geographic right now, plus mixed with the state of mind. Um, I guess I can -- The community, to me, would be -- I guess it would be the town. I guess that's what I would call the community. You know, it's [community name]. I would just consider that as a whole community.

She regrets not being more involved in the community but states that she is very active in her church. EH does not immediately see her church as a community even though her level of involvement to a great extent mirrors her engagement in the community when she was raising her children. As she thinks about it, she says that it is a community and the one she is most involved in. However, it is not geographically based and on a certain level it also represents family to her.

TJ discusses community in terms of his immediate and extended family relationships. He is a program manager for a city department and serves on a number of local community-based organizations’ Boards of Directors. He defines community as family but rather than
defining it in terms of the broader community, family includes biological relatives and an extended family consisting of his long-time friends. At first he says that community is a sense of belonging but he quickly corrects himself and goes on to say,

TJ Well, actually, no. It's more what comprises the community that you belong to. Who's in it. What organizations are in that community. What's your involvement with those organizations? But, for me, I guess when you get right down to it, it is family and, you know, not just my biological family, but those people that I consider part of my extended family.

While long-time friends may be extended family, TJ relies upon and values them as he does his biological family. He says,

TJ Very close friends. I have acquaintances, but close friends are -- I consider my -- part of my extended family. Those people that I would turn to just like I would a brother or sister. And there's very few people that are part of my extended family in that regard.

TJ’s personal and professional definitions of community allow him to keep the two spheres of his life separate. TJ’s definition and operationalization of family as community is contextualized by personal interactions and intimate social relations. It does not include generalized members. In his work, community is based upon a geographical area, the agencies he works with and the people those agencies serve. There is no overlap between the institutional definition of community as prescribed in his professional life and community in his personal life. In his personal life, he bases community on biological and long-term associational relationships. TJ has such a clear understanding of what his personal definition is and the difference between that and the responsibilities and expectations of his job. He says that he does not allow his professional and personal life to overlap. Therefore, none of his co-workers are considered part of or can be part of the community in his personal life. This is in contrast to PD’s relationships with her co-workers and friends.
PD is a female college administrator. She uses her meanings of community as she carries out her job. She is also a mother, grandmother and in her role as aunt is raising one of her deceased sister’s children.

Informal adoption and childcare in African American communities is a form of volunteerism that has yet to be studied as volunteerism. Indeed, one could argue that the donation of time needed to raise and take care of children is probably the most important indigenous tradition of civic responsibility to be found in African American communities (Stanfield, 1993:144).

In her interview, PD talks about her family and her desire to instill in her niece and grandson the values of service and community. She says,

PD I think of community in terms of my family, my neighborhood, my church and my work, um experiences. I think for me community means people who are bound together, either through blood, geographic location, common interests, common concerns. So, I think any person, depending on what group they belong to, whether it's familial or ethnic or geographic, other than class, will have many communities that they belong to.

As we continue to talk about her definitions of community, it occurs to me that she might have a hierarchy or place different priorities and values on these definitions. As the interview proceeds, she confirms there is a hierarchy and the value she places on them is based upon personal or sentimental attachment. The rankings are an indication of both the value she places on them and where she feels she has an obligation to invest her time and energies. By knowing and understanding these rankings, we may be able to ascertain where (organizations) she might be willing to participate in community activities. If we had a similar understanding of the priorities in other people’s lives we might be able to identify opportunities to engage them.

I An-- ho-- are they sort of like in that order? Where it's at the more personal level to the broader level? Or, --

PD Probably. Probably that way, yeah.

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9 In this excerpt, I included my comments/responses because they were an important part of her being able to articulate her thoughts and feelings.
I: Okay. So, your family would be the most important and the one that you identify most with?

PD: Um hm. That's right. And then church. Um, education should probably even be in there. And then, um, my neighborhood. Kinda like that, yeah.

This demonstrates how closely a person can identify with their meanings of community.

I: So if you sort of -- since you've prioritized in a certain kind of way, could you just let me know, for each of these levels, what makes one more immediate and one more less, more distant from you in terms of how you identify with them?

PD: Um, they're prioritized by what ma -- means the most to me. So my family means the most to me. Even probably more than my church affiliation because I can see God in my family. Some people would put church first and then their family. But I would do it the other way around. Um, so they're prioritized by how important they are to me. If I had to give one up, it would be very difficult 'cause they're all components of a greater whole. But, the one that I mentioned first, family, would be the last to go if I had to -- if someone came along and started taking away pieces of me.

Note this last statement. She is so closely identified with the dimensions of community in her life that she refers to them as pieces of herself.

PD shared with me that community is a part of who she is. It is not just meanings applied to an abstract concept or principal; it is using words to express sentiments and meanings associated with something personal and integral to who she is and how she relates to the world. This is a perspective shared by all of the participants. Community is as much a part of them as breathing. While they quite eloquently discuss expressions and acts of community in an abstract way, the participants are always aware of the interconnection between perception and action. For example, JE and CG both explain that a characteristic of community is that it is internalized. CG states that community is a mental construct and JE says that it encompasses the whole person. Therefore, the individual and community are inextricably linked. This is important to take into consideration when talking about society and its decline.
RC talks about community as family and kinship but he is not necessarily referring to biological or extended family relationships. He volunteers on various Boards and is very active in his neighborhood association. Like TJ, the nature of his work provides a definition of community. His agency’s service or catchment defines community. However, this is not the definition he uses. RC’s definition includes family but he goes on to say that community is an extension of family. He says,

RC  Well, community really I think is an extension of the word family. Um, by that I mean that one has to be able to live with the family -- with family members and be able to um get along through some sort of mutual um understanding around how to resolve differences, if there are differences. And I think the same kinda thing happens in community. ...I think that whatever organization or entity is in the community impacts the community. Much like members in a family impact the family.

His sentiments are very similar to those of EH.

RC, PD, NC, TJ and EH, point out the relationship between organizations, community, and community members. This relationship is based upon a set of interactions that we need to recognize as having a profound impact upon the sustainability, and possibly, prosperity of a community. In thinking about community in the context of family and familial relationships we begin to understand there is a closeness and interconnectedness between people, places and institutions. Any discussions about community and civil society should either include a discussion of this interdependence or, at a minimum, an acknowledgement that it exists.

Community as place

Many individuals see community both in terms of a geographical area with discrete boundaries as well as situations in which social interactions occur. RC says,

RC  ...definitely community has geographic boundaries and, and um, sometimes those boundaries are, are determined and defined by um mores and culture uh and sometimes it's
defined by race and religion um such as a Catholic parish. Um, but definitely a geographical boundary as well as a social uh boundary.

Often, there is a connection between a geographical and social boundary. The physical demarcation leads to social identification and may be used as a criterion for membership and inclusion or exclusion in a community.

Community is a place of belonging, nurturing, and support. Place is both literal and metaphorical. It is also geographically delineated and psychologically interpreted. It is within community that one can find kinship, acceptance and a place of psychological security. The geographical or territorial limits of community are based upon a specific location, a neighborhood, a street, a city, a town, or even a sea island.

Identity and affinity can develop as the result of living in a specific geographical area. They can engender the same emotions and loyalties as when people speak about family and kinship. Location attachment is the result of the intersection or interaction between different aspects of community. Some of the participants speak about community as a place-based experience when they were growing up.

Six of the interviewees specifically discuss their historical recollection or remembrance of what it was like to live in a particular neighborhood. It is in those experiences they say they learned about and experienced community. They have fond memories of those experiences and use them as the point of reference or gauge to analyze social interaction and civic commitment in contemporary society (i.e., decline of civil society). These six participants observe changes in the ways in which neighbors relate to each other.

CG is the youngest person in this study. At the time of her interview, she was a senior in college and actively involved in on- and off-campus activities. One of her definitions of
community is place. Even as she defines community as place, she says that community is so much more than that. She says,

CG  How I define community? Um, personally I would define community as a place --it's a place where people come together. It's a organization of various things. Boys and Girls clubs. Types of things that help to better people. Um, community is, it's, to me, it's the formal definition of like community and people coming together. That's what it's supposed to be. You have a community in your neighborhood. You have a community in your city. You have a community in school. Everything forms its own community and its set by the boundaries outside of it. And what goes on and within it.

CG's observation is similar to Weber's model of open and closed relationships. A community is open if any person is able to participate. It is closed if there are obstacles and barriers to participation (Nisbet, 1996: 81).

As CG describes what community means to her she introduces the concept of a real or authentic community. The authentic community is best interpreted as the community the person identifies with most closely. This helps to explain the distinction she makes between a social community and the community on her college campus. In fact, she says that the community created by her college, can never be her community.\(^\text{10}\) CG's authentic community is the neighborhood she grew up in and remains attached to.

CG makes a distinction between the needs that are being met by the institutional community created for her at the college and the traditional or familial community that is in her personal life. This is reminiscent of TJ's distinction between his professional and personal communities. The community created by CG's college can never be a community to which she has strong bonds or ties and yet she still has a sense of obligation and responsibility to be involved on campus.

\(^\text{10}\) CG's community is the one in she grew up; she remains committed to the residents and the neighborhood. She feels connected to the community on campus but feels separate and apart as well.
This idea of a real or authentic community is important because it helps to explain why an individual can be both part of and remain apart from a community. It also has implications for what individuals choose to invest their time in. CG is active on campus and feels a responsibility to participate in activities that reflect her interests, issues and concerns. At the same time, she does not feel as connected to the campus, or the school for that matter, as she does to her neighborhood. She feels strongly about remaining connected to her neighborhood. CG volunteers with and mentors young people in the neighborhood and those attending her former high school.

CG Um, for me like a community at [school] is not my -- it's not my traditional community. And, I go home to my real, you know, to my real community. And that guides me in my social life, at least. And the people I, the people I've, tend to be around. Because they come from the same community, share in the things that I like and the things I like to do. So, it's like a mentality. Community is a mentality to an, that's developed from living in that area or being in that area. And, you tend to want to care about your community and where you live.

CG suggests that while the institutions may create a community, people’s identification and even loyalty, to a certain extent, may differ when it comes to what they feel is their real community. What she relates to as her traditional community.

Community is geography or place with boundaries created by the institutions in it. LK says community is a place but it is a place that leads to social activity. It is a physical location whose boundaries may expand based upon the need or needs of an individual (member). It can be a location that is as small as an apartment or as large as a neighborhood. Place can represent something small and self-contained or expansive and far-reaching.

LK Community starts with the place and the environment; the neighborhood you live in, and expands based on, uh, your sense of, of need to establish the community as a safe environment. So neighborhood is, uh, could be somebody living in an apartment. It could be a building ... It could be the place where you live and could generate social activity.
The social activity he refers to is not limited to interpersonal interactions and exchanges. They are part of it but social activity can also include people coming together for a specific purpose, such as organizing to address an issue affecting one or more persons. The organizing can be small-scale and focused on an apartment complex or the block. It can also be a large-scale mobilization effort. The point that LK makes about the narrow focus of community and the environment is similar to the way in which MGB approaches civic engagement. The process begins with the immediate surroundings and later broadens to the larger community.

ROB discusses community in terms of environment just as LK does and adds the dimension of meeting a need of an individual. He also includes the psychological aspects of community in his definition as well when he introduces the concept of comfort or feeling comfortable in the environment and in relationships with others.

ROB Uh, let me see. The short answer is it's, uh, a group or set of interpersonal relationships. Uh, sometimes complex. Sometimes not so complex. Uh, but the larger answer is that it's a, it's an environment in which its members, uh, can feel comfortable, not only participating but also comfortable not participating. Feel comfortable organizing, feel comfortable sharing information, to feel comfortable sharing resources, uh, and all these different aspects are supported by our common interests, our common trusts, uh, our common convictions and commitment to the physical aspect of our engagement.

ROB is talking about environment but does not immediately connect community to a clearly defined geographical area such as a neighborhood, city, town or state. As a point of clarification, I ask him the question directly.

I So, is it geographically bound or is it bound by something else or is it both?

ROB Uh, I think it's a little bit of both. I think it's a little bit of both. Uh, traditionally when people talk about the physical community they refer to it as a neighborhood. Uh, uh, but I think with the advent of the Internet, people have begun to realize that community has less a physical boundary, uh, and more of a conceptual or interpersonal boundary so it becomes what you and I believe. So you have a community of stamp collectors or a community of, uh, musicians, or a community of lawyers that, that are not necessarily restricted to a physical space, but then you have a community that lives within a certain block or in a certain development or in a certain region that becomes tied to physical space.
Here he describes community as a function of physical, social, or psychological boundaries. From his response we see there are many opportunities to create communities, but more importantly that different types of communities exist.

ROB helps us to identify some of the different types of community memberships a person might have. He also helps us to see that technology, particularly the Internet, has changed how people perceive and relate to community and each other. While community is not necessarily limited by geographical or physical boundaries, the fact remains that these boundaries exist and anyone participating in any activity in civil society is subjected to them on a daily basis.

VB’s definition of community includes geography, environment, and the people who are physically located in it. He reflects upon the question about how he defines community and says,

VB Hmm. Definition, my definition of community is any and all of those surrounded in my living and working environments. [Inaudible]. That's because I also live and work in the same community so, it's pretty much the same. But there's also the inside and the outside of the community. Those who have the same interests that I have, I would consider them to be the inside of the community. Those who don't, I consider them to be outside the community. Although they may reside in the community, they are not a part of the community. So, that's what I consider the community, those who have the same interests as I do in my immediate environment in which I live and work.

However, he emphasizes the people or member aspect of community as he defines it. He acknowledges the physical or geographical area, but he is most interested in those individuals who share his values. For him members and qualifying for membership represent community.

MGB says that she has two definitions of community. One of the definitions includes community as a geographical area. In her life, it is represented by the place where she lives now and to a somewhat lesser extent where she once lived and was raised. The other
definition is related her social community. It is in this second community where a person gets reaffirmed, supported, valued and given a sense of purpose. The interpretation of community integrated into her social community, guides MGB’s professional and personal life. Her two definitions of community are not mutually exclusive. They are interdependent and closely related. She explains her feelings in the following way,

MGB  Well, because I'm not, for me community is not necessarily defined, uh, around a geographical location, but it's anywhere where folk of color live, exist, uh, they have some significant social issues that, that population of people have to, either have to or are dealing with.

People and their relationship to each other and how they define the issues that are important for them. Where they're at. Wherever they’re geographically located and how that geographical location impacts a couple of things. Where they live and where they work may be two different geographical locations. But each, each one of them has some direct and indirect impact on where the person rests their head and so I do think it is where the individual lives, predominantly.

Community is related to social interactions, issues, and is impacted by the environment and geographical location people reside in or are physically located.

MGB explicitly connects community and race. Her description of the social community is similar to the ways in which other participants define community in general and from the conversation it is clear that she associates being African American, defining community and what motivates her to remain civically engaged. In fact, it is her perception of the role of community in the African American experience that serves as the basis of her community consciousness.

MGB’s activism guides the choices she makes regarding activities and issues to become involved in. It also guides how she approaches the constituency work associated with her job
as a legislative aide. When I ask her what she believes the role of community has been in the
African American experience she says,

MGB Predominantly, uh, geographical with social overtones. Issues of, well, you know, being locked out of voting, being locked out of being able to go where you want to go. Sort of the early Civil Rights Movement, uh, set the tone for me, around what I needed to consider to be the important things regarding community. So most, most of my community consciousness is based around issues, and how those issues impact the people that I care about.

Individuals may see community both in terms of a geographical area with discrete boundaries as well as places in which social interactions occur. Living in a particular area often creates identities, affinities, and biases. Many of the interviewees remember what it was like to live in a particular neighborhood or on a certain street. It is in those experiences they say that they learned about and experienced community. It is also those place-based experiences they seem to miss the most, but more importantly use as the point of reference to decide whether or not community is changing in contemporary society and what roles they each should play as members of multiple communities.

Community as a partnership between people

Community is also perceived as a partnership primarily between members (although the participants have expectations that the larger community is a partner). Non-members and institutions play an important role in determining the nature and quality of that partnership. As JF considers community, he thinks that it is people working together for a common good. He says,

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11 At the start of this study, I made a conscious decision not to ask ‘racialized’ questions because the purpose of the research is to present the community experience of men and women who just happen to be African Americans. I am aware of the historical traditions of community among African Americans. However, it is not a focus of this study.
JF Community, to me, community is the essence of people coming together or living in a
general area. Working toward the common good of all, um, and that takes its place from, um,
from the standpoint of taking care of children, taking care of seniors, taking care of family,
looking out for one another, housing opportunities. These are all the things. My sense of
community growing up, particularly in my early years in [home state], the sense of community
was all looking out for one another.

This is a feeling shared by study participants PK and LMB. Community as a partnership is
what MBG alludes to when she describes what she considers to be the best way for individuals
to become involved in their communities.

Community is PK’s family legacy. She comes from a family where civic participation
and responsibility are a family tradition. It is also ROB’s experience, as well. PD, LMB, and
DB discuss their efforts to create and perpetuate a similar legacy in their respective families.

PK says,

PK Let's see. Community, to me, is a group of people coming together. They're sharing
the experiences; they live together, live in the same neighborhoods; they have similar issues,
and they try to work around those issues. Um, I would just say it's more, just a group that has,
you know, it's a shared, group of people, a group of people sharing different things, um,
whether good or bad, you know, that kind of thing.

When LMB was growing up, her mother volunteered for political campaigns and
participated in organizations involved in civil rights issues. She says that her mother made
certain that her sisters and she participated in community organizing activities. This civic
consciousness is something that LMB tries to instill in her two college-aged daughters. LMB
echoes the sentiments of JF and PK in that she believes a community is a group of people who
are working together to solve problems and are interested in the overall well-being and success
of that community.

LMB My definition of community is uh, let's see. Good question. My definition of
community is people working together, living together, working together, solving problems
that may affect everyone who lives in the community, and um, you know, doing things to
promote the community's well-being.
KW shares PK’s and LMB’s feelings about community. He says,

**KW** Um, well I define community as uh commune – a unity, um, and whe- in effect, that um even though it doesn’t exist, um my ideal of community where a group of people get together and um and live in somewhat harmonious um they live harmoniously among each other. You know, and helping each other. Um, looking out for each other um you know helping each other when they can and pooling together when it, when they really to.

The participants articulate a collective responsibility and participation characteristic in their definitions of community. The fact that this is part of their consciousness and interpretations of community indicates the possibility of actions being motivated by a sense of altruism. This is evidence to counter the communitarian suggestion that in today’s society individuals are motivated by self-interest.

**Community as institutions**

The participants recognize the contributions institutions make in the development and sustainability of communities. JF identifies various institutions and ranks them in terms of what he believes to be their importance in a community.

**JF** Well, I think -- As you can see, I keep pointing to family. To me, that's an institution, and I think the most important, and certainly in my life has been, so I think the family is one. There is the church. You know, I'm there -- You know, I believe church provided a foundation in my life, and certainly in my younger years, and certainly in my adult years. Um, academic institutions are certainly critical. An educated populace is going to be able, in my view, to do more than a noneducated. So, you know, you have your business infrastructure, and a community can't exist without businesses, and, so, there's, as you begin to think further about it, I would probably add businesses to the prior question of the idyllic community. You got to have a vibrant, you know, business community. There are services that must be provided for that populace within the community.

Institutions play a critical role in the development of social and cultural capital. As a result, they should be a priority in a community. Institutions may have their own definitions of community and criteria for membership which may be incompatible with other segments in a community.
Of all of the interviewees, CT provides the most comprehensive discussion of institutions and community. CT, a community organizer and at the time of the interview a city councilor, acknowledges that the institutions identified by the other interviewees are often part of a community but he goes further and explains the roles and the scope of some of those institutions. He points out that the institutions identified by the interviewees have their own locations within community. For example, as he talks about churches he explains that churches have a role in the community for both the members who live in the area where the church is located, as well as individuals who live outside the area. As CT sees it, institutions are conduits that mediate the relationships between individuals. He says,

CT You know all these entities that you name um don’t create community in the broader sense, necessarily, um, as schools, some schools try to create community that goes beyond trying to play a part in, the in the creation of the community beyond its laws and help people in the neighborhoods around it have a sense of their uh relationships to each other and some don’t. Um, same with um churches, you know churches, you know they play a role in, in the community outside their membership role but they might take uh might have an interest in a broader community but there are many who don’t. Um, so it’s, it’s not the, the institutions that are located in a particular geography that defines, that indicates uh that indicate whether there’s a community there. Um, it’s much more the uh the issue of the values [they hold].

Institutions assist with the transmission and perpetuation of values, cultivation of interests and internal and external community member negotiations.

CT If the objective is to create community in the larger sense and that is to uh help people in a particular geographic area develop an appreciation of the value of their potential interrelationships then you, you need, you need all those, you need a number of different organizations to kinda administer the relationships.

I think just talking in real terms, what realistically, what um, what institution would help to move people in the direction of identified, their common interests and uh um I think it’s, it’s difficult to define it by looking at a particular neighborhood or set of neighborhoods. That um you know or just looking at organizations in a particular neighborhood. I think you need a body of people who are united in the beginning to demonstrate a particular way of life and a set of values in a day-to-day life of that community and then who um are an a instrument of spreading those ideas those practices and ideas to a broader population, um bringing the political forces into their network.
There is an array of institutions a community, for example, legal, educational, cultural, governmental, economic, medical, social, spiritual, and familial. These institutions work together to create, support and sustain a strong community. When I ask the interviewees to identify the institutions they consider to be part of and important to a community, the responses include educational, political, religious, economic (including local businesses and banks), social services, health, cultural (such as museums and theatres), sororities and fraternal organizations.

Absent from the discussion on the decline of civil society is an honest analysis or investigation of the role institutional actors play in constraining and enabling the reproduction of society, and thus, social capital. Kenneth L. Schmitz acknowledges in the article, “Community: The Elusive Unity,” that institutions exercise power in a community. It is the nature of that power that should be of interest to us.

For although the actuality of the institution is the measure of its power, institutional power by its nature is not only or even principally the power of physical force. Institutional power is social, the power to move individuals, to defend the institution and society, and to co-operate with individuals, with other institutions, and with the larger society itself. An institution is a social means towards the discipline of power in its raw physical form, and in that discipline it must meet the expectations of the community in general (1983:256).

Institutional forms in a community are simultaneously separate social and interconnected systems. These institutions are the truest representation of the social constructedness of community that a society has. Individuals, through their agency, are able to exercise a level of power and control over these institutions. Yet institutions still enable and constrain community members and non-members.

Robert Bellah (1985) writes in The Good Society that in order to solve the economic and political problems in our society, individuals must actively participate – exercise their agency.
and control over the institutions. TJ and AP state that individuals create institutions; therefore, as the creators, individuals can by conscious effort change or create new institutions. However, reification often occurs when individuals enter into an exchange relationship with a bureaucratic structure. In that power relationship the creator no longer exercises any influence or control over the institution.

When JE responds to the question about institutions in a community, he does not discuss a specific set of institutions or the roles and functions they individually and/or collectively have in society. He discusses the way in which institutions interact with the people in a community. He recognizes the power relationship, often unequal, between institutions and members. JE feels one of the reasons communities have problems is that institutions try to impose their own perceptions, values, goals and desires on members. The interests of the institutions may be at odds with those of community members. He sees this as being counterproductive and highly unlikely to achieve the goals of the institutions.

JE believes institutional members need to be empowered to go out and empower community members and non-members, alike. That way, institutions and community members are not operating at cross purposes. At the same time, the institutions are building the capacity of communities and social capital. This excerpt from JE’s interview illustrates his point by discussing one of the ways that a church can be a part of the community because it is physically located in the area while at the same time remains apart from the community’s members because of dogma, philosophical or religious principles and practices.

JE Right, but, at the institutions, it – and I think that's pretty much a character flaw in how and why we have some of the problems that we have is because the institutions want to impose and that would just be a power play the other way around. When you impose on, on individuals, the individuals will solidify their, their position against you. And so that’s, that’s not, um, a free flow of information. That's not the openness that you need to have. So the
institution will start to cut itself off from the community. It’s like having a church that says, you know, that points a finger at the people in the community. Well, the church actually ends up holding itself off from everyone else and it doesn’t impact them at all. They just co-exist. So, it’s hard to get an institution to influence it without the people. Like the institution has to empower individuals inside of that institution to go out and empower individuals external to them and then they’ll keep the institution strong. And that’s a different approach.

Locating in an area and serving segments of community members does not necessarily mean that an institution is part of the community. Community members need to believe that an institution is committed to the growth and development of the area. They also need to feel that the institution is a partner, not an outsider, coming in and directing or attempting to control the members.

The social commentators do not acknowledge any accountability or responsibility on the part of institutions to or on behalf of the members. They do not appear to subscribe to the idea that institutions are themselves a representation of community. This is an oversight on their part because, in most circumstances, if you have individuals, generally you also have institutions. The extent to which there is disorganization or decline is related, at least in part, to the nature of the relationship between individuals and institutions. A key element in analyzing the nature of the relationship between institutions and community members is whether or not the institutions are successful in responding to the needs of the community members. Success is not only based upon tangible and observable outcomes, it is also related to perceptions.

The ontological task of the institution, then, is to realize in a determinate way the communal principle; so that the institution is needed – not to secure the community itself, as though the latter were something separate from the individuals – but to secure the common good of its individuals (Schmitz, 1983:256).

This is a recognition of the relationship between institutions and community.
In the following excerpt, TJ tells us that the individual is the creator of institutions. Institutions develop out of real or perceived needs of community members. They are in response to the desires of community members.

TJ  I don’t think they [institutions] make up a community. I think it’s what has come out of the community. Um, you know, you get a group of people together, and, and, you know, they all have converged in a particular section of town or some space, and they guide a town, and they say, okay, well, we need a school, you know. We want education, you know, which means you got to bring in teachers. We need a place for, to put your money. So, that’s how a bank – So, I think the community is what creates the institutions. Um, and now it’s up to those institutions to help the community stay alive. ... If I, you know, want to see a movie, I know I’ll see folks like me around there. Um, if I want to do sports, or whatever, I know where to go golf, or tennis, or walking, or swimming or what have you. Galleries I can go to...

His position appears to run counter to the role of institutions presented in the discussions on the decline of civil society. Based on their representation of institutions and relationships with community members, it appears the institutions are what drive and define a community. However, institutions do not define community because they are one part of the community in the civil society equation. The structures within a community exist because of the dynamics between the individuals and the structures themselves. The structures may be objectively real but have no value unless individuals support and continue to engage in them.

In examining the condition of community institutions, consideration should be given to whether or not members of the community place the same value on them as researchers, politicians, and many others. It is important to ascertain whether or not members of a community believe an institution is important. This has implications for public policy and philanthropy. If upon investigation, researchers find out that community members think a particular institution is important in the life of the community, but do not appear to support it, then we may need to find out how the members rank that institution in terms of contributions.
to the community and how responsive it is to the community members. An institution placed high on the members’ priority list but is still in decline, requires further investigation.

VJ does not single out any particular institution as having a lesser or greater role in a community. She says,

VJ You know, from your grocery stores, on down to your places of worship, on down to your educational, your financial …You know, people come with a myriad of needs. So, there’s no – I can’t think of an institution that is totally frivolous unless it was something that was completely based on some kind of vice. But other than that, you know, people have a lot of needs.

For her, most of the institutions in a community have a purpose and value as long as they meet the needs of members. This sentiment is shared by other study participants. The concept of needs being met should not be overlooked. More importantly, the perception of whether or not a need is being addressed to the satisfaction of community members should not be discounted.

The church is an institution that is singled out by five of the interviewees as being a priority for them in their personal lives and recommended as an opportunity for civic engagement. The historical role and significance of churches in the development of the African American community is undeniable. The issue today is whether or not they continue to have the same social, economic, and political impact in a community as in the past. VB says,

VB Churches would definitely be a part of the community. It’s you know, um, it’s interesting because one of the things that I – One of my experiences growing up in an urban setting was that there were so many churches; and it [the community] values that but it’s one of those things where you have these little [inaudible] churches and there’s nothing wrong with that but I think that – I don’t see it as one church, but you like to see – In my ideal community – I’m going to go back to that. The churches that would exist, there would be enough

12 I am speaking only about the Christian church. The contributions of Islam and Black Muslims to the African American community are significant and equally as important in sustaining and revitalizing urban areas throughout the U.S.
churches to serve the entire community but not so many churches that you’re inundated with, with everywhere you look there’s a church and, and not only there’s a church, but there’s a church that’s struggling to stay afloat.

It is significant that VB goes beyond the traditional position of the importance of the church in the African American community, particularly in urban areas, to point out that churches, like other institutions, have to be strong and viable. If not, then they just create another opportunity for a community to be weakened. For example, in one neighborhood, there are over 100 churches within a 30-block area. Many of them have dwindling congregations and yet their pastors seem to be unwilling to consider merging or relocating to smaller spaces. Given the preponderance of churches in the area, there is an economic impact on the community and a missed opportunity for the pastors of the churches to lead by example.

VB wants to ensure that his community strong and thriving institutions because he understands that this is critical to a sustainable community. When assessing community institutions in his neighborhood, he considers whether or not they are strong institutions. He is not concerned about power and control or authority structures. He just wants to know whether or not the institutions are functioning and serving the needs of community members.

VB  Um, I think that the community has to have housing obviously; some degree of commerce in terms of stores, um, and I would say probably your smaller stores. Um, but stores that were able to operate, not stores that are, are on the brink, you know, stores that are prospering and prospering because the community supports them. Um, libraries, schools. I think um, places and things where youth in particular, things for them to do. Because I think that’s missing in a lot of communities, that, you know, don’t have those things really available to them.

If we were conducting a survey of institutions or inventory for his community, VB would ask to have a question about whether or not a particular institution is strong in the community added to a checklist or instrument.
VB’s comments about stores prospering because of community support are noteworthy because he understands that community members have to patronize local businesses, otherwise they cannot be sustained. The impact of community member support of local businesses demonstrates the partnership that must exist between institutions and community members. However, the partnership can not be limited to economics or commerce. It is not enough to have a certain institution located in a community. Its quality, relative strength and responsiveness to the members’ needs are important factors in terms of acceptance and support by those members.

Other interviewees discuss the need for a strong business infrastructure. Economic institutions are important to the viability of a community. JF says that a community cannot exist without businesses and other types of economic institutions. In fact, some of the indicators of a community on the decline are the condition of local businesses, number and frequency of business closings and, or relocating to other areas, job creation, retention or loss, and the mix and robustness of the business sectors operating in an area.

Nonprofits are important community institutions because they provide important services to members and non-members. Nonprofits are often the intermediary or mediating structures for members and the larger community and its institutions. One of the interviewees says that nonprofit organizations provide the underpinning and foundation in a community. Among the nonprofit organizations identified by the interviewees are social service agencies, community health centers, and agencies targeting specific populations such as youth and senior citizens.

JF sees government and social institutions as serving important functions in civil society. Governmental organizations provide the structure and framework that allow a society
to provide services, maintain order, educate its people, create housing and provide financial
services and stability.

Typically local governments are responsible for formal education, law enforcement, fire protection, sanitation and sewers, streets, and parks. Inaction also affects urban life quality. For example, the failure of most urban governments to have an effective employment policy has probably contributed to poor housing, high crime rates, and other urban ills (Hanna, Niculescu and Silver, 1974:155-156).

Policies of local governments lead to some of the changes that a community experiences over time.

Political organizations are a means to political participation and of accessing power in our society. Political participation, as represented by patterns of voter registration, voting, and volunteering on political campaigns, is often viewed as an indicator of civic engagement. A community’s influence in the political arena is in part measured by the extent to which its members are involved in political activities.

Many marginalized and disenfranchised people doubt there is a way for them to obtain recognition and support from the political system. In *Man and Development*, Julius Neyere (1974:15) writes, “[t]he job of a strong political party is to act as a bridge linking the people to the government they have elected, and government to the people it wishes to serve.” For many
poor and marginalized people in the U.S., neither of the two traditional political parties offers them solutions. The political parties do not create the bridge or link that Neyere is talking about. Instead, we are left with a schism between the expectations of the politics of access to wealth and power and the politics of fairness and equity through representation and the distribution of wealth and power.

For the study participants, educational institutions are critical to sustaining and building communities. Educational institutions are responsible for socializing individuals to the norms of the broader society. At the same time, these institutions provide individuals with knowledge the society deems appropriate for employment and necessary to ensure individuals will develop into fully participating and contributing members of society. In some communities, there are divisions and differences between schools located in affluent and less affluent neighborhoods. The impacts of economic constraints, racism and classism have exacerbated inequities within some of the school systems. Despite these inequities, we see examples of schools being able to educate their students successfully and instill in them a sense of civic responsibility and engagement.13

Cultural institutions such as museums, theatres, art galleries, repertory companies, symphonies and concert halls have a role to play in sustaining and building communities. Cultural institutions provide outlets for self-expression as well as opportunities for the cultivation of community spirit and participation. They are also often overlooked as a source of economic development in a community. Arts organizations and cultural institutions are part of a community’s economic base and can be catalysts for the renaissance of a community.

13 Many school districts require that students perform community service.
The community art center can enhance and develop the arts and culture in communities. It is an example of an institutional form both enabling and constraining an individual. On the one hand, media has a negative impact on African Americans through their representation in images. On the other, when used proactively and responsibly, it has a positive (powerful) effect on African Americans and the community as a whole. TJ remarks that he would participate more in his community if there were more cultural and social institutions.

Community is comprised of institutions and is found in those institutions. This is fundamental to any discussion or theoretical analysis of community, particularly here in the United States. When people discuss the decline of civil society (and with it community) they cite very specific examples of the current conditions and predicaments of institutional forms that have traditionally been identified with a healthy community, for example, families, schools, businesses, religious and social organizations. Nancy Rosenblum (1994), Seth Borgos and Scott Douglas (1996) refer to these community institutions as mediating civil society.

Mediating civil society instills habits of responsibility and cooperation above all, and these are compatible with the cultivation of a variety of particularist values and personal qualities in social formations ranging from cultural subcommunities to workplaces. Moreover, secondary associations are not expected to cultivate political virtues, and social collaboration need not translate into political representation (Rosenblum, 1994:554).

The participants do not suggest that a community is sustainable without these institutions. Also, none of the participants believe that the decline of one (or more) of these institutions necessarily leads to the decline of community. They do express a serious concern about the state of the family institution. The participants feel that if there were one institution that could ‘cripple’ a community, it would be the family.
Changes in institutions affect the condition and stability of a community. The loss of institutions such as schools, local businesses (large and small), and churches leads to changes in communities. Some of the interviewees feel that the decrease in the number or quality of schools, local businesses, churches, and other institutions leads to the rapid decline of communities. Despite this, all of the participants still believe that community can be created and sustained even when important institutions are deteriorating or may be in decline.

The interviewees believe individuals have a great deal of power to impact the direction of their respective communities. They acknowledge there are countervailing forces exerting pressures on community members; there are also disparities in terms of social, educational and economic access to resources. However, they still have a deeply held belief that individuals, not the institutions, are central to the community’s ongoing viability and sustainability.

While I am not using ecological theory as an analytical frame in this research, that is I am not looking specifically at the interdependence of institutions and structures in the lives of the people who participate in the research project, I am suggesting that perceptions about institutions (for example, responsiveness, power-authority dynamics, previous history and interactions, and anticipated changes in the future) affect, if not determine, whether or not individuals choose to actively engage in, trust, or even support certain community institutions. In the communitarian and decline of civil society analytical models the relationship between community institutions, community members and non-members does not receive the attention that it should. The communitarians and decline of civil society commentators do not address the reasons that members have a lack of trust in the major institutions in the country, particularly the government.
Expressions of community are the definitions, symbols and metaphors that the interviewees use to describe their feelings and perceptions of community. These definitions are personal and may change depending upon the particular community the individual is thinking about or participating in. Does a constructed meaning of community necessarily mean that it is also relative and the relative meaning makes it difficult, if not impossible, to research and analyze? As this essay demonstrates, it is precisely because of the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations that we are able to uncover the various themes and threads associated with the study participants’ interpretations of community, membership, responsibility, institutions, need and reciprocity. There are various ‘senses’ of community. These ‘senses’ or articulations of community lead to different characteristics of civic behaviors and civic attitudes.

The next chapter, Acts of Community, considers the circumstances and conditions under which the definitions and perceptions of community are reflected in the respective communities and activities of the members of the study group. Specific concepts or themes of the chapter are community boundaries, criteria for membership, circles of community, and community in everyday life.

This chapter also illuminates one of the gaps in the decline of civil society debate by acknowledging that there are barriers to participation in communities in our society. Among the barriers to participation are time constraints, competing pressures and demands on material and nonmaterial resources, the perception of a lack of appropriate cultural, social, and civic organizations and programs for different demographic groups in a community.
CHAPTER FOUR
ACTS OF COMMUNITY

In my everyday life. Um, I try to make sure that I nurture the, the relationships that I'm a part of in whatever the community is. It may not be – I mean, I was just speaking with someone last night. You know, we’re in a community, but I haven’t seen this person in like over, you know, geez, almost two years. But, we’re, we, we’re a part of a community that, you know, started a long time ago. This is one of the people I’m saying that, you know, is like a friend or whatever. I don’t know. You have to – I don’t know. It’s a balancing act, and I think that depending on whatever the needs are of whatever particular community needs you at that time, that’s where you have to devote most of your time. PM, female

The interviewees use their definitions of community to structure relationships in the public and private spheres of their lives, create boundaries to determine membership and parameters of community, and shape their perceptions about civic participation and engagement. Acts of community are an application of those definitions in the physical and social realms of their lives. The acts of community identified by the interviewees and in the sociological literature include mentoring, voting, membership in social and professional organizations, involvement with community agencies, making calls to check on people, participating in church activities, organizing crime watches, and sharing food with those who have less. These activities are conducted in circles of community.

Circles of community are similar to what Etzioni refers to as multiple communities. The interviewees do not spend time discussing the larger community in their responses to the interview questions. The larger community is important but it does not take on the significance of a supracommunity as it does for the communitarians. The relationship to the larger community as far as the interviewees are concerned is that of a partner in the creation of society. Community is an overarching system structuring or determining how they conduct their lives. The interviewees believe that as long as the community supports, encourages,
rewards, empowers, and takes care of the needs of members there will be reciprocated interest and commitment.

Faces of Community

The same strong ties that help members of a group often enable it to exclude others (Portes and Landolt, 1996:19).

Central to the investigation of membership is what the basis of that membership is. Every community has a set of boundaries. Those boundaries may be used to define members, roles, responsibilities, and expectations about participation. The ease with which people become members can affect their attitude about community. Members and non-members are also factors in their level of commitment and participation in the community.

Community boundaries

The excerpts from the interviews with CT, JE, LMB, BM, MGB, JF, PM, AH, and VB provide a fairly comprehensive overview of the criteria for membership in a community. All communities have boundaries. Sometimes the boundaries are obvious such as physical boundaries. The social or psychological boundaries can be less apparent. Jesse Bernard in *American Community Behavior* writes, “A more abstract criterion for determining boundaries is one based on common interests. Boundaries so defined are relative” (1962:6). In addition to the directly expressed terms and conditions of community boundaries, non-verbally expressed and interpreted cues are important as well. Boundaries help to determine criteria for membership, membership responsibilities, expectations, and activities of members.

The boundary may be perceived in rather different terms, not only by people on opposite sides of it, but also by people on the same side ...We are talking here about what the boundary means to people, or, more precisely, about the meanings they give to it. This is the symbolic aspect of community boundary and, in so far as we aspire to understand the importance of the community in people's experience, it is the most crucial. To say that community boundaries are largely symbolic in character is, though, not merely to suggest that they imply different

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meanings for different people. It also suggests that boundaries perceived by some may be utterly imperceptible to others (Cohen, 1985:12-13).

The boundaries or limits of community in one situation are not necessarily applicable to another. That is why we must be cautious in developing our theories or imputing motives when analyzing community participation and social connectedness. There are many subtleties and nuances in the interactions between individuals. As a consequence, we may have only observed or identified one possible explanation but that does not mean there are not more explanations for a set of behaviors or particular interaction.

Geography is the most obvious community boundary. The rural-urban dichotomy is a starting point for establishing boundaries in an analysis of the physical community. Many times, neighborhoods, streets, blocks, cities, towns, and urban-suburban are the lines of demarcation. A racial or socio-economic dichotomy is often used when discussing the social community. For the interviewees, community is really not limited to a geographically defined area. However, they do acknowledge that community can be geographically defined and based upon no other criteria. Community as a specific geographical location is among the interviewees’ definitions for community but is not a determining factor or selection criterion for membership or commitment.

If geography does not necessarily determine membership, then what does? Social-psychological boundaries reflected in the interpersonal and group dynamics of a community. The basis of membership can be shared values, interests, commitment and investment in the community. CT suggests that membership is based upon a shared or common set of values or interests; he does not frame it as exclusively geographical. There may be an aspect of geography for some members but it is not the defining characteristic.
It’s your sense of your shared interests with other people either in your neighborhood or other uh people who you share common identified characteristics. Um, and you can move from there to uh to uh the self-identification of membership in a community. And other people acknowledging, acknowledging that certain symbols of uh membership both in terms of people’s viewpoints and behaviors as well as um external symptoms, you know such as uh race um education you know … As I said just as a loose definition where someone sees himself or herself as a a member because of their identification uh with the certain set of ideas, a certain situation, a certain geographic area, a certain um racial group um. But then there are also the organizational issues you know as a as the people who were trying to create community begin to establish organizational frameworks then there becomes a more sharply defined line between those who live in the neighborhood and perhaps generally share the concerns, the experience, the concerns, the perspectives. But haven’t yet um agreed to um actively participate, to invest their energy in the uh, in the work and so they stay outside. You know stay outside. Um, because they haven’t been wanting to submit to the discipline um of the organization.

For most of the interviewees, race and gender are not at the top of their lists of criteria for membership. For JE, there is no requirement as such. Membership is conferred upon an individual as long as they are in a community. JF, MGB, and BM express a similar attitude or outlook regarding membership. JE suggests that the needs and interests of individuals are the basis for membership. In a sense, it is based upon your circumstances. For example, you live in an area because of available schools, housing, and employment opportunities. He says,

JE You’re in the community that you're in by circumstance, by socio-economic factors that play into that. Like what schools you go to, what, um, if you can afford to go to a private school, of course, if yours is a little bit different than the ones that go to public. It (inaudible) is pretty much defined by your, um, by your interests and your needs. So, all those things have to play -- I mean it gets to be pretty complex, but I think that all of those things play into a community. You know what -- 'cuz there's a reason why you're in whatever situation that you're in. There's a reason why you're in the family that you're in so, you know, you usually, um, register for a political party based upon what your family’s political affiliation is. It's not the information that you get that makes you make a conscious decision. 'Cuz what are we? And so, that's where the definition comes from. That's how you take your cues. When you're little, you're saying who are we and you start to figure it out based upon what the circumstances are and what your needs are..

From this excerpt, we see another dimension of community – cultural transmission through socialization and observation. This speaks to an issue raised both in terms of the decline of
civil society, social community, and LS’ observation that there is a generational divide, in terms of perceptions and attitudes regarding civic engagement and participation.

For LMB and BM individual actions and motives help to determine whether or not a person can become a member of a community. Although LMB acknowledges that residence makes a person a member, I believe what she is doing is making the distinction between simply being a resident in an area and a positive demonstration of that membership. The person has to be an asset, not a liability. BM feels that a person has to be an asset. While articulated differently, each of these participants is making the same point.

Community members do not necessarily decide whether or not an individual can become a member of a community. It is within the power of the individual, at least up to a point. An individual or an institutional actor makes the decision about which behaviors are appropriate. This raises an interesting issue related to social distancing and exerting external pressures to ensure members’ acceptable (i.e., non-threatening or harmless) behaviors.

LMB Uh, anyone can be in, uh, but those who are definitely out in everything, except for perhaps living there, are people who do harm to their community, or to the people within the community.

BM Uh, hmm. I think what really distinguishes whether a person is going to be an asset or a liability to the community that they live in is really how they -- I would say the responsibility is to keep it clean, to, to keep it safe. I think that it’s very important. When I say safe, I mean, you know, [inaudible] activity that definitely, you know, definitely would go to safety and [inaudible] of any nature, any type of illegal activity.

MGB includes geography as a criterion for membership, but it is not limited to identity with or affinity to a physical location. It is related to a sense of connectedness to a location. This is a connectedness that engenders commitment and a sense of responsibility to that location. Here she is talking about where you live, seeing its value, and the importance of investing in it and ensuring that it thrives.
MGB  I think the fundamental basis of belonging to a community is that you live there. Wherever you hang your head, that’s, that should be your community. Um, and I think that anyone should feel obligated to meet their neighbors, stretch out their hand, offer assistance when they can. Um, and offer the kind of support that just naturally occurs with people of color. Um, I think that if, if once you move somewhere and you’ve sort of planted your roots there, then you have an obligation to be concerned about whatever goes on in that location and the people that live in that location. And sharing of whatever knowledge, skills and abilities you might have that’s gonna help your neighbor. That’s what I believe.

JF and BM believe that you are born into the community and are automatically a member. This is a simple and straightforward understanding about how membership is determined and under what circumstances an individual will be recognized as a member. Sometimes membership is assigned to a person. BM says that race confers membership in one type of community. Birth and residence are two other examples. JF’s perspective is interesting because he says that membership is conferred at birth. The person’s decisions about what to do with that membership are what are important and germane to the decline of civil society discussion.

JF  Well, my sense of it is, ironically in mine, once you're born into it, you're in. That's your membership. Now, the question is whether you want to exercise it or whether you want your membership to expire or not. That's your choice. But you already have carte blanche. You have, you know, you have entrée upon the point in time when you're born in the community.

How you want to negotiate these different communities is your choice, and if you take my communities within the community, folks don't always touch all of them. You know, as I pointed out, you have your family, you have your religious, you have your educational, you have your organizational, you have your social. Some people don’t touch all of those aspects of the community. But, my sense of it is, whether you want it or not, you’re in some of them.

Automatic membership does not confer status or lead to opportunities for participation. It does not even guarantee acceptance. JF says, “Now, where you are in the playing, pecking order is another question, but your membership is already assigned once you become a human being on this earth. That's your membership.” Maybe my line of inquiry needs to be
expanded to identify what a person is entitled to as a result of their membership status. This may be a factor in whether or not an individual decides to participate in that community.

BM’s and PM’s comments are related to the idea of membership and acceptance. New members may have some concerns about being accepted. PM’s comments about her experience with a women’s group demonstrate how problematic acceptance can be even when a person meets the stated or recognizable membership criteria.

BM  Well, the community that we've been talking about has been more geographic by nature. I think there are non-geographic communities such as the African American community. A good example of this is that you're in whether you want to be or not and, you know, I mean -- And I think that, you know, a lot of stuff [inaudible] but as far as physical communities, who's in, who's out, um, I've been fortunate enough -- I think if you live there, whether you rent, whether you own, for however amount of time you plan on being there or don't plan on being there, that you become an automatic member of the community, become an asset or liability to that community depending on your actions [inaudible]. And I know that there are communities that have, um, you know, shunned away people who have come in, others who have come into the community. I know that was one of the things in terms of moving into a suburban neighborhood that I think was one of the fears. You know, would this community accept us? And, you know, that's been the -- You know, and I think the jury's still out on that one in terms of, in a lot of different ways, and it's been of benefit in some and not so beneficial in others.

A person can be a member of many communities. As a result, the basis of membership and acceptance ultimately depend on the community (type, nature, or purpose) combined with the attitudes, values and perspectives of the other members. This is something BM alludes to.

PM  I think it all depends on what community it is. ... I think it really depends, but in terms of, you know, even a sense of community if it was with, you know, just say, you know, a group of African American women. I mean sometimes you get shut out because of socioeconomic or whatever. Instead of saying, you know, this sister needs our help, so even though, you know, you may have a PhD, and this one only has a GED, you know, you could still, I think you should still be able to find some sense of community with that person, but, um, I don't know. I really think it just depends on what the community is, you know, and who the members of the community are.
From PM’s narrative, we see that there are hidden codes and signals among community members that encourage or discourage participation. On the surface it appears that an individual meets the criteria, standards, or expectations of membership.

VB and AH are co-workers and were interviewed together. They are also friends and share similar values. These two men use their definitions of community as guiding principles for the way they conduct themselves in their personal and professional lives. The contrasting perspectives about membership in a community are what make their responses to the membership question interesting. In some ways, VB sees an inside and outside to his community. Geography plays a part but it is more about the values and philosophy of the person that help him to identify a member or potential member. AH believes anyone can be a member of the community he is talking about. He points out that he is not talking or thinking about it in terms of some kind of specific criteria to identify who is in and who is out. He says,

AH Well, I don't think it's a question of being in and out because those who -- There might be someone within my immediate environment that has a different view from my view but that still has an effect on how things work with me, how things are [inaudible] with me. You see, even though I may have to create other situations to deal with that that's still a part of that community.

Membership does not have to be a zero-sum game. It can be a process of exchange and accommodation. The issue is the manner in which these dynamics are manifested and ultimately perceived and internalized.

When VB defines community as family, the exchange between the co-workers continues. AH says,

AH Well, you know, no. I don't think it can be limited because community, for me, based on my experience has been -- For example, we have been basically brotherhood seekers in the sense that you can come into my community and you may need assistance but you're not from

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14 VB and AH are the only participants who were interviewed together.
my geographical area but at the same time you can get the same assistance that you would need, you see. So, I mean, it's just the holistic point of view and this whole idea of communalism. You know, so, what's -- I mean, for -- Being a person of color that's been, been my experience. You know, someone who comes into the community who needs our assistance is able to get that assistance. So, that's what I mean by being brotherhood seekers, you know, wherever, wherever we are. …

This is an articulation of his premise that you take your community with you. Community is about humanity and brotherhood. There is the obvious human connection and then there is one based upon shared experiences. This is resonates with VB and he says, “That's what I would, I would say is that the community is geographic because I can only live in one place. But because I move and have different associations, that I can be a member of various communities. …” VB continues to explain his frame of reference for membership.

VB Those that are similar to, you know -- Community, again, is not just demographic but it's idealism, you know, those who share the same ideals that I do as far as progressiveness, economic development, education and culture [inaudible] in any form. You know, when I see and feel it, I can plug into that 'cuz I'm a member of those with like minds to me, just as well as through conversations I can determine whether a person will meet the challenge to be welcomed into my community. You know, and I guess they can do the same thing. And that's how, I guess, you call it or other people call it, networking. You know what I'm saying? [Inaudible] but I see it as a community membership. So, I belong to many of them as a matter of fact --.

The membership in multiple communities is why membership is not usually based solely upon geography. However, there are cases where the criterion for membership is place-based.

One of the findings from the analysis of the interview responses about membership is that members play a critical role in the creation, viability, and sustainability of a community. Members are viewed as the only ones who will take care of and are empowered to ensure there are strong institutions in the community. They care about each other and their community. Members also have similarities with each other. Members have the potential to have a daily impact on the community they identify with. Members want their community to be better and
become stronger. None of the interviewees believe the larger community (including institutional actors) is making the necessary investments in its members.

Membership carries with it responsibilities

Um, I think that if you have people who are willing to give their time, um, then you should also be willing to give your time. And I think that, you know, a part of, you know, belonging or being a part of a community, also, feeling like you belong, is knowing that sort of like people have your back, you know, for lack of a better word. You know, but you're all there for each other. That's what makes the community strong. That's what keeps, you know, everything, the glue -- You know? PM, female

An assumption that the current debates about the decline of civil society makes is that members have a responsibility to be actively engaged in the social, political, religious and economic life of a community. Within each community and associated membership status there are different levels of expectation regarding participation and commitment. Most of us feel community engagement is an obligation because a person receives many benefits simply by being in a community. It does not matter whether or not the person takes advantage of the opportunities. What matters is that as a community member a person has the ability to access and reap the benefits and costs of these opportunities at any time.

PD believes that members should participate in any way they can. In her interview, she says that resources, time, health, and family obligations affect participation. She, like other study participants, understand and share the experience of, for example, competing interests, limited time, and resources, despite their desire or affinity with a group.

PD Uh, because the community in many ways sustains you. It's always there for you and sometimes you won't have the time to do what you might want to do. But, when you do have the time or the resources you have to do it. It's not one of those things that somebody else has to do it. You are the somebody else.

You sometimes don't have the time to do everything that you wanna do. And there are times when you literally have to back off of all the fin -- not the financial, but all the volunteer stuff and make some money. So, it, it depends upon, you know, what's goin' on, how much time you have, how your health is, how, how your kids are doin', what you put your emphasis into. But, for me community involves all of those.
VJ feels strongly that a member has a responsibility to the community. She says,

VJ To support other people in their community. I think one of the things that I experience and I try to give back to members of my community, particularly the community that I call African American women is to be there for each other as we try to move along within the struggle. And I hate using that word, but let's just, you know call it what it is. It's a struggle [inaudible]. And because we bump up against, you know, things that would have us thrown back, we have to be able to come back to our sisters, get reaffirmed, get [renewed], um, refortify -- so we can back out there and do the work that we have to do. And that, I think that is our primary responsibility. Whether the woman or man or person is working in human services, health care, finances, real estate, whatever, whatever, whatever, whatever, you know, that person should not feel as if they're out there alone. I think that that's our responsibility to our -- That's my responsibility to my community.

PD says that when the time comes to assist the community, the members should do what they can. VJ shares the same sentiment. As VJ thinks about the member's responsibility, it is clear she feels other members ought to ensure that a person feels comfortable, safe, and supported. JF seems to share a similar belief. He believes members have to support each other. Individuals who have the ability ought to help others who do not. However, in JF’s life it is not just about his actions; it is fundamentally about the person he believes himself to be.

JF Well, let me, let me even elaborate on that more, because this is really a statement of who I am. Um, my view is one has an obligation to participate in the community because when you're born into it, you're already deriving benefit. See, you're deriving benefit. So, my whole thing says that it's like, it says, what? Reach one, teach one? My response, my sense of it is we have a responsibility to try to help those who are unable to care for themselves. We have a responsibility to pass along our knowledge to the extent that we can. We have a responsibility to educate.

JF points out that a person has to a play a role in the community. It is not even that everyone has to play the same role or has the same level of commitment. He feels that a member has to recognize their responsibility and act based upon abilities and resources. He says there is a place for everyone in the community and a role for them to play. JE also talks about this but I believe this is a feeling shared by all of the interviewees. What is not shared by all of the study group is the expectation of participation in the life of a community.
So, you know, again, you can't become a part of this community and not play a role. Now, what your role will be, will be different for each of us. But there's a role for everyone to play, and my sense of it is, one has to exercise that and participate in that. To do less, then the person is of no benefit to the community if they're not playing a part at all. Because a part of respecting what makes you strong, will actually make someone else strong, so you have to understand that you're part of a collective so a part of the respectful of being a part of the collective is that you pass energy back and forth to where you -- to where you receive energy from, so, as far as an obligation of, of, um, as far as a defined obligation I'm not sure that there is a defined obligation more than there is doing what's necessary. I'm not saying doing what's right, but doing what you can is pretty much our obligation to the community. It's not a defined obligation.

JE and EH disagree with the supposition that membership carries with it a responsibility or an obligation, which is a major premise in the cultural debates. In our cultural debates, the expectation is that members should be engaged and that engagement demonstrates social capital and a stable democratic society. JE and EH both feel there should be no expectation for a member to make any type of contribution or become involved in civic activities. However, they believe that at some point in time, a person will participate in the community not because it is an expectation or an obligation; it will be a choice they make because they come to realize the important role they can play in the health and welfare of their community. The community and other members need to be a part of the process of informing and mentoring members so that they know the impact or difference they can make in the community. Imposing an expectation of participation on community members disregards the relationship between personal development and people’s understanding of their roles in a community.

JE and EH believe participation in community activities is a private and personal matter. However, JE does believe that if the community is providing the appropriate level of support (material as well as nonmaterial) people will learn what it means to be members of the society, including their respective places and roles in it. In this case, the community’s actions
and level of engagement are key factors in helping people to understand membership. How the community engages with and interacts with an individual is part of the learning process.

JE says,

JE So in a community everyone has different rates of development and you can expect that they will understand that; but you shouldn't, um, shouldn't feel that they're obligated to participate. Because at that point you'll be putting them in a position to do something that they can't handle or that they don't understand. So I think people evolve to get to certain positions to actually understand that a little bit better. So once they do understand it, you're expected to act accordingly once you understand it. You can't shun those responsibilities. It's like the same concept of spirituality is that and this would be one of the things about (inaudible) kind of understood is the thought of fellowship is that you're doing something to stay strong in your faith. At what point are you not strong enough to actually stand on your own? Is it just the exercise of saying that I need to be a part of this club so that you can (inaudible) because I'm not strong enough to stand on my own or at what point do you get turned by the collective by standing on your own once you become strong in your faith. So, I don't know the answer to that question, but it has to actually -- it plays itself out just like the community does. Do you actually feel obligated to do something for the community or are you obligated once you understand or once you come to a certain level of understanding of what it is that the collective needs. That's where your expectations come in. You're expected to do this once you have an understanding, but when you get that understanding is debatable (laughter). I think we can always say that we should know enough by now that, that's a part of everybody's development, but sometimes we don't know.

JE points out that there does not need to be uniformity in participation. ROB also addresses this issue during his interview. JE says there should be an expectation of the community to help its members and as a result the members will help the community. The key point he stresses is the idea of obligation or responsibility. He wants to make the distinction between coercion and voluntary participation and contribution to the community.

It is through the growing awareness of one's value and place in a community that enable a person to take advantage of the opportunities for active and sustained engagement.

JE I think there always should be an expectation of the collective to help individuals. To always expect that. Now, as individuals to help another individual, there also should be an expectation but shouldn't be looked at as an, as an obligation. ... I'm not sure that there is an obligation to the community. I think there's an obligation to humanity that we all have. But I think as an individual, um, you are supposed to like develop, evolve in, in, and pretty much affect those people who are closest to you. It would be like having a, a glass of hot water or tea and having to pour a little more water in it to actually make it warm.
According to JE, in the end, there is no obligation to a particular community, but to all of humanity. This is something that would resonate with AH and KW because they perceive community as all of humanity.

JE You always have those individuals in the community that affect it; the collective, um, in one way or another so you always have to keep those people fed or keep them cool enough to actually affect that warm glass of water. So that it actually levels it out and I think that's, as an individual, the role of awareness and of learning and developing spirituality and humanity and, and becoming a little bit more focused and solid on humanity helps the community. Um, it helps an individual affect other individuals that will in turn, turn a community. I think that's the only way you actually turn communities is to affect them individually, not as a collective. A collective does not determine what the community's going to do. It reacts. It's a reactive state more than it is a state of force. (Inaudible). So I think, I can say, I think my role in that is to be a catalyst as an individual, but it's not to, to affect it as an individual.

When members prioritize their communities, they are making decisions about their level of participation and commitment. Members are also making a statement about the perceived value and significance of a particular community. It does not have to be a judgmental act, it can be as simple as personal preference or motivation. For example, ROB and NC feel that the first obligation is to an individual's family and after that the member should make a contribution to the development of the community. Here is what ROB says about membership and responsibility. ROB’s discussion is about something specific and the potential consequences of a particular action or set of actions.

ROB Uh, to not break, to not break the trust. Plain and simple. Just to not break the trust. And, I mean, that's, that's, that's a cut and dry way to say. But if members are able, you know, adhere to what it is that the community's wants and needs are and don’t abuse it, then I think that contributes to a healthy community, a healthy organization. It's, it's easy to say and hard to do. I mean sometimes people break the trust and don’t know they broke the trust, you know, but for the most part, I think if people take the time to think about it and keep the interests of the community at the forefront as opposed to the interests of the individual, then I think that it will go a long way to enhancing the people’s ability to trust.

In the next excerpt, we continue to see specific acts or activities identified as illustrations of community engagement. After first participating in the family community, NC
says members should participate in activities through the church, community-based organizations, intergenerational projects, and mentor young people.

NC: I, my, my personal feeling is that should, that after family that should be a real high priority and I think that's one of our problems that, that, that people have to invest in their communities and so that's why I say, uh, you've got a duty through the churches or through, through the community organizations or, or outside the family sphere and the next, the community sphere means that you're willing to, uh, register and vote. That you're willing to take time out of a busy schedule and attend a meeting where, where you've got to stand up and speak up and other things.

Volunteer to mentor a child, you know, with the schools. We've got an excellent program where every year, uh, we called it a [Pen Pal] program where they match up adults with students and they write each other during the school year. We start writing letters to each other in the fall and then in the spring we, we have a luncheon together where you get to meet your pen pal. And I find it interesting because the children aren't directly part of my family, but over the, you're so busy on the phone, and cell phones and all like this, it's almost like a lost art. Sitting down and writing letters to each other and having a young person say well, my favorite sport's basketball. And I'd say well have you ever played golf? Oh, no, I've never been up to [the] Park and I said I like Duke Ellington and Count Basie and he'll write me back, well, I like this rap and he'll ask me, who's Count Basie, you know. And we go back and forth like that, you know. And that's a lot of fun. That's what communities are all about.

In addition to volunteering and mentoring, NC believes that registering to vote and voting are critical to the exercise of membership. He connects membership with citizenship. Until now, the discussion about membership seemed disconnected from the concept of citizenship. Here, and with the results of David Karp’s survey to support this suggestion, we see the exercise of membership is also citizenship, and good citizenship at that. In his article, “Americans as Communitarians: An Empirical Study,” David Karp presents the results of a national poll studying the extent to which American people subscribe to communitarian ideals. The responses to the survey question related to perceptions of good citizenship are relevant to this study because it asks for responses about specific actions.

Good citizenship means most of all… predominant support was essentially between a more communitarian position, “contributing to one’s community” (34.3%), and the more social
conservative position, “obeying the law” (34.0%). Slightly less support (27%) was given to the individual position, “providing for oneself and one’s family” (Karp, 1996: 45).15

Twenty-two out of twenty-four interviewees directly or indirectly express the idea of connecting membership to making a contribution to the community.

During the interview with MGB, I specifically ask her about the types of activities she believes reflects membership in a community. For example, I ask her about participating in the PTA or volunteering for political campaigns. She says participating in the PTA or volunteering for political campaigns are civic engagement activities, but does not feel they reflect community. This is counter to the discussions in the communitarian and decline of civil society literature because these two activities are considered indicators of acts of community. She feels that activities should begin where the person lives and then move outward. In effect, where you live is the center of a ring of concentric circles. As one moves outward, the scope and breadth become wider. At the center, a member becomes involved in the day-to-day issues of community life. Once those have been addressed, the member then moves out to the next ring of the circle to focus on and engage in activities there, and so forth.

MGB Well, I wouldn't say that that's community. I wouldn't say that PTAs or political campaigns are community. They're definitely civic participatory activities, but most, I mean, the best way I can put it is what [politician] said, politics is all local. Okay. And so at first you have to deal with the politics of your street being clean, your, your ability to be able to park your car without getting a ticket, uh, snow removal, um, environmental issues that are impacting your neighborhood, um, if there happens to be a school in your neighborhood, whether the children are safe around that school. Clearly, those, those are community issues. Um, but I don't see political participation as a community issue. So I think that for, for anyone living, like I said where they plant their feet, where they lay their head, if they're not concerned about those fundamental things, everything else is for not. Who the heck cares if you participated, volunteered on a campaign or gone out and vote, if you first, where you rest your head and where you put your feet is not safe, it's not clean, it's not in any condition to raise a family.

15 Karp states this national survey of randomly selected participants was conducted at the end of 1996. The total n= for the survey was not referenced in the article.
So first let's get people involved in sweeping in front of their street, in front of their house. Watching out for the young people who play in the neighborhood. Watching out for any crime that might be going on that you don't want young people to be impacted by. Taking care of the seniors in your area. Making sure that if they need some help that the neighbors are there and really that extended family. That neighborly feeling, I think, becomes the critical basis that, that you then can build upon someone working in a political campaign or working on election day for the city.

So there has to be and it comes by way of demonstration. So if you move into a neighborhood and your next door to a neighbor who welcomes you, who explains to you when the trash day is, who tells you this is your neighbor over here, here are the people who live on this street. These are all the people we meet on a regular basis so you can interface with all the other neighbors around you. If you don't have that, then you have no sense of belonging, which means that naturally you don't feel any sense of belonging to anything else.

So I think all of this comes from how people cherish the importance of where they rest their head and making that outreach and that connection before they make the other connection to the next level, which is civil participation or political participation. However you want to frame it.

None of the activities she mentions have anything to do with formal organizations. Perhaps volunteerism should be seen as a stage in the development of member participation or citizenship. Or, we consider what she describes as a model not just for community development, but a process for developing members to take on leadership roles.

All of the interviewees believe that at some point a member will be involved in ensuring there is a good quality of life where they live. Community participation is specific to the individuals, so are the activities they engage in. The close association between self-perception and community participation is not discussed in the cultural debates about community.

The interviewees accept that there are different degrees of ability, awareness of the meaning and contributions of membership, and levels of participation in a community. In the literature and in our cultural debates about post-industrial life in contemporary society, there appears to be neither an understanding nor recognition of the disparities of opportunity, socialization, and support for participation. It is not enough to have
opportunities to become involved, what are also required that the members or potential members feel the community is serving their needs and that they will be accepted as members.

Another key factor is the perceptions people have about the value of their contributions. What needs to be added or at least acknowledged in the decline of civil society research is the importance of the other members’ perceptions about the value and contribution of the individual.

ROB I think, I think, I think it boils down to whether or not a community serves the interests of the individual and whether or not that individual feels they can make a meaningful contribution to that community. And, you know, that could take on different forms, different levels, uh. Everybody’s contribution doesn’t necessarily have to be the same, but the question is just is whether or not the contribution is, is meaningful and helpful and doesn’t take away from community so if you look at a housing development, uh, for example, you know the tenants’ association, everybody’s a member of it, but not everybody can make a meaningful contribution to it, but everybody can contribute something. And so I think just the people’s ability to make a contribution. People’s ability to be, ability to participate in the process no matter how large or how small I think is an important aspect of membership.

Community’s response to and appreciation of its members plays a significant role in participation, commitment, and leadership.

CG, like ROB, feels that it is important to engage in activities that improve or better the community. Individuals who engage in negative or potentially harmful acts are not fulfilling their responsibility. In some cases, the interviewees feel that a person like this is not really a member of the community.

CG I think, although roles change in community, I think the common thing for any member in a community is to try to make the community in which you live better. I think that should be an obligation for any member in any community. For everyone here at [my college], for anyone at [my old] high school, com – as an alumna [of the high school]. Living on the [designated] floor. Everything is to make it better. To make the community better and there’s always room for improvement, in any community. And always things that a community should do as a whole. And, a community – a person living in a community should not look at responsibility as a personal responsibility or be selfish in what they do and do something knowing that it’s hurting someone else. In a community environment, what you do should either benefit someone else or at least make it

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better. If not completely benefit. It sh- it’s not – to be a member of a society is not to be selfish. It’s to be open and to be giving.

In keeping with those sentiments, KW says that a person should not be disruptive. LMB and BM offer a bit of a twist because they believe that a person’s actions and motives help to determine whether or not they can become a member of a community. In their view, if an individual disrupts or interferes with the life of the community, he or she should not be considered a member.

KW Uh, um, our responsibility in an individual sense is to provide um, um to provide ummm two things that ensure the survival of the community and don’t do anything to disrupt it. Or, like sleep with the neighbor’s wife. Or, (laughing), you know, that’s a, that’s a great way to destroy a whole community. Um, um, and providing respect um to the individual members, your neighbors um and etcetera. Um, uh, it provides a sense of sharing you know being able to share. Um, uh, and keeping the neighborhood, the community clean, that’s one thing. That’s um, don’t provide--, let your trash affect other people’s property values. I mean, I mean, just being respectful um, is uh you know one of the things.

LMB Uh, anyone can be in, uh, but those who are definitely out in everything, except for perhaps living there, are people who do harm to their community, or to the people within the community.

BM Uh, hmm. I think what really distinguishes whether a person is going to be an asset or a liability to the community that they live in is really how they – I would say the responsibility is to keep it clean, to, to keep it safe. I think that it’s very important. When I say safe, I mean, you know, [inaudible] activity that definitely, you know, definitely would go to safety and [inaudible] of any nature, any type of illegal activity.

In these excerpts, the study participants discuss what might qualify as well as disqualify a person from membership in a community.

MGB associates membership responsibility with cultivating leadership. She sees this leadership development as being critical to the progress and future development of a community.

MGB .... a member's responsibility is, is just that. Being able to, to recognize that there are times when you have to step in and you have to take responsibility for making things happen. And there are also times when you have to step in and take the reins from someone else who thinks they can still make things happen, but they can't. And so it's a form of developing leadership, that, that I believe gets to the heart of whether a community can move forward or
not. And, and part of doing that means that as you're taking on that responsibility, you are also teaching because at some point you're not gonna be able to make the decision anymore and you're not gonna be able to handle the degree of responsibility anymore so who do you pass it on to? And I think passing on can happen at a number of different levels.

CG is a young leader. What she says about her generation has implications for efforts to recruit members in community activities. She reveals that her generation has limited their understanding of civic engagement to the struggles for civil rights and liberties nothing more. This is a misperception and one that needs to be corrected now.

CG explains generational differences both in terms of civic engagement and the perceived need for that engagement. She says that her peers believe the issues from the Civil Rights era have been addressed. Therefore, there are no social, economic, or political problems for people to advocate for or become engaged in. It is interesting that CG’s generation limits civic engagement to the Civil Right Era. CG is not optimistic about her generation becoming as active as previous generations. This is due, in part, to what she sees as a certain amount of complacency. She says, “...It’s like a satisfied generation...”

CG I think my generation is very out of touch with community. I don’t think, if you look at every, the way everything is in my generation’s day, it’s so different. Like community or even relationships 50 years ago people stayed married for 50 years and I think, as my generation progresses, it’s not like that at all in relationships and it’s also lost that kind of family environment and that – family creates community. ‘Cause a community ultimately should be one whole family. I think that my generation is out of touch in many things, out of touch in speaking up and out of touch in their voice. I think you’ll find a lot of people in my generation who do want to see things become better and do work towards that. But as a whole, I don’t think that we have enough involvement in the policies in anything that’s shaping our future. I don’t think that enough young people stand up for what they believe in; I don’t think that they have a voice really. So I’d say we’re out of touch. But, in many aspects I think it’s just a lack of being involved and people don’t see the need – I don’t think my generation really sees the need for so much involvement. And, we’re kind – we’ve come up in the generation where we’re kind of satisfied. … Where it’s like “Well, you know, we don’t fight this anymore. We don’t, we don’t have to walk miles to get school or sit at the back of the bus, and those kinds of things that people used to have to do. And so we’re satisfied with what we have and I don’t think that’s the way it should be, as black people, or, as young people period.
Lisa Sullivan (1996) points out the following observation regarding the different generational perspectives related to leadership, participation, and community among African Americans. She writes,

Most young African Americans born since the passage of civil and voting rights legislation in 1964 and 1965 have lost their confidence in the leadership of civil rights organizations. Many believe that traditional Black leaders lack the capacity, desire, and ingenuity to address the contemporary crises that destabilize Black working-class life and destroy Black neighborhoods and families. . . . As consequence, an entire generation is now profoundly disconnected from Black civic action and civil rights activism. And because traditional social and civic organizations in the Black community have failed to reach out and engage this new generation of post-civil rights citizens, the future of Black institutional and organizational leadership with the vision, capacity, and innovation necessary for the 21st century is bleak (Sullivan, 1996:7-8).

This lack of awareness and understanding of community participation and the expectations of membership among the younger generation will have long-term implications for civil society, particularly civic engagement in the public sphere.

DB also talks about the generational changes he sees in his community. Anna DeVeare Smith alludes to something similar. Anna DeVeare Smith says,

It’s very clear that the black community is not a monolithic group anymore.16 This is both a good thing and a bad thing. The young people I teach have no common ground. I don’t yet know what they’re connected to. I’m trying to find out. In fact, I’m working on a play about this, called Dream. The question I raise is, What is the dream now? Is there an our dream? If not, what will propel us, what will motivate us? For me, I believe there still has to be a we for African American people. But what shape is that going to take? (Dumaine, 1992:121).

In order to discover the shape or composition of the We that DeVeare Smith is discussing we need to broaden our definition and understanding of civic engagement and community participation. While at the same time, creating a social infrastructure that allows society to develop a civic awareness and appreciation among young people. We also need to provide

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16 Biracialism and multiracialism have implications for our society and the way it defines membership.
17 RG talks about the loss of We-ness among African Americans.
good role models and modeled behaviors for all young people, not just African Americans, to imitate.

Self-interested materialism was elevated to an American value in the 1980s and continued throughout the 1990s and 2000's. This materialism needs to be replaced with a new American ethos; an ethos that extols the virtues of selflessness and less conspicuous consumption. The voices we hear shaping the government’s agenda and public discussions, continue to privilege religion, race, gender, and class. We need to hear other voices and find inclusive rather than exclusive strategies for change.

There are often barriers or obstacles that limit or prevent a community member's involvement in a community. CG and DB identify generational issues but there are others. Multiple roles often create tensions for members because they have to balance expectations and responsibilities across different communities. PD and ROB mention that people have time constraints. As a result, one obstacle to meeting the needs of multiple communities is the demand on a person’s time.

Where role partners overlap in the same person or persons, scarce time and energy can be spent sustaining two or more identities simultaneously (thus reducing the possibility of role strain as well). … For example, resources provided in one set of role activities (e.g. social contacts, company property, expense accounts, technical knowledge or skills) can be used to meet obligations in other roles; such expandable capital makes the person more valuable to other role partners (Thoits, 1983:184).

Community members are faced with competing demands upon their time and personal resources. The extent to which a community member participates in a community often depends upon factors over which the person has no control. Some of the interviewees acknowledge that people do not have time to do all of the things that interest them. They
have to make choices about participation. They create their own hierarchies of community as a way of avoiding or minimizing any cognitive dissonance.

Perhaps that is why we see a decline in participation or involvement in certain social, political, or volunteer activities. A decline in participation does not necessarily mean people are no longer volunteering or engaging in some aspect of community or civic activity. It may mean we need to determine which activities and under what circumstances people are participating. We also need to identify the real and perceived obstacles to civic engagement.

I ask LK if he has any suggestions about how a person might be able to balance the tensions and the demands of several different community memberships at the same time. He says,

LK Well, that happens all the time, you know. That's the nature of the beast. Depending upon how much energy and participation you want. Or if you're open and I understand that there's a right connection. There's no island here. There's, these commitments so, you know, again (inaudible). What you believe is gonna help correct this and generally for us it has to, uh, be at a wider level. 'Cuz you have to understand that whatever, you can rest assure that it's probably, uh, you may be denying it, but the same element that caused you pain in one place is gonna cause you pain someplace else. So, but, you know, I think that that's, that begins to evolve into activities that lead to uh, uh, what does it take to bring about the kind of fundamental changes you want? So in other words, at some point you end up going all the way to, to the capitol because that's where the power is. So, you know, everything evolves from power one way or the other and you get, you know. (inaudible) You've got to figure out where to get to so, you know, the building blocks to get to some point till you, you know ...

People identify with multiple communities. As we attempt to reduce membership to a simple and manageable list, we may be missing key information about what it means to be able to participate as a member of a particular community. Also, we may not be able to fully comprehend the significance of the selection criteria on the member, non-member, and more importantly society as a whole. PM's example of classism in the scenario she describes illustrates the potential impact of member attitudes on civic engagement and responsibility and
bears some further study. She feels that each of women should have accepted every member.
The class attitudes and social distancing she observed are unacceptable.

There are a number of different points of impact in a person’s life that will inevitably influence how and when they will become active in their community. Economic concerns may limit the amount of free time a person has. Several of the interviewees talk about the economic realities of today being such that earnings are not enough to provide the basic necessities of life. The person may have to work over-time or even take a second job just to cover expenses. In households with children, the costs of daycare may be so high that it is better for one person to be at home while the other is out working. People are having to make these and similar choices all of the time. The reality is that the allocation of resources, in this case time, is an obstacle not a lack of commitment to the community.

The time commitments attendant to occupational pursuits, as well as the social and community obligations often expected of those seeking occupational mobility, may well influence the extent and nature of voluntary participation. At the very least, the types of activities engaged in and the extent of involvement are likely to differ between the employed and the non-employed. Time constraints alone, for example, may impose restrictions on taking part in certain types of informal networks, such as interacting with neighbors (Edwards, Edwards and Watts, 1984:9).

The Edwards, Edwards and Watts article addresses the impediments to women’s involvement in voluntary associations. However, the circumstances described in the article are not necessarily gender specific.

Many scholars and all of the interviewees agree that patterns of civic engagement and participation are changing. So, what are some ways to engender or rekindle the desire to participate? Information makes people feel connected. It can also connect people to each other and community activities. This is an issue one of the volunteers for a community project I worked on talked to me about. For a long time, she had wanted to volunteer but lacked
information about where to go and how to participate. When a private foundation began to invest in her neighborhood, she became part of an information-sharing network and remains active today. One cannot help but wonder how many more individuals are out in our communities waiting for someone to talk to them about the contribution they can make and why what they have to offer is important.

What ROB says supports what the volunteer shared with me. He says that part of the problem is that people do not know how to get involved. One thing to note in ROB’s response is that people may support an organization (its missions, goals and activities), but still not get involved. In this case, lack of active involvement does not mean there is no support for the community. This apparent contradiction begs the question as to why if there is support, there may be limited participation.

ROB  I think part of it is information. A lot of times people don’t participate because they don’t understand or they don’t know. And so it’s trying to empower people through, uh, understanding, empower people through access to information, and, uh, I think, I think that’s critical to people’s participation because I don’t, I don’t think people by nature are lethargic. I think they just become that as a result of lack of understanding. So for a lot of people they don’t understand how certain systems work or certain organizations work, but they know what the mission is. What the goal of the organization is so, so they support it. You know like if you’re working with kids. They may support it but they may not get involved with it because they don’t understand, one, how they may be able to contribute or, two, how it actually works to be able to find a place where they can contribute. So I think information and understanding is critical for, for people’s engagement.

People have to feel an attachment to their immediate environment. A community can cultivate this attachment by ensuring there are social, cultural, and other activities of particular interest designed with members’ or potential members’ needs in mind. For example, TJ talks about being more involved in his community when he was younger. Then he was raising a family and his children’s activities required that he interact with neighbors and other parents. EH mentions something similar during her interview and notes that the nature and level of
involvement in her community has changed now that her children are adults. As TJ reflects on his current experience of community, he describes how he feels about the resources available to him where he lives and how they affect his attitudes about the community. He says,

TJ Because the community's changed. I mean it's changed dramatically and it's changed negatively as far as I'm concerned. I used to be very involved. There were activities that I could do. Now I understand that [I can't participate in the same activities as I did when I was young], but when you see what's out there, I, I, I just don't see where the community has, has grown in a positive way -- at least African American community. I just don't see the things that would make me feel like I'm, you know, I'm a part of the community. It just, it just doesn't.

TJ’s experiences are not atypical. The issues he raises should be taken seriously because he is part of the baby-boomer generation. This is a generational phenomenon that needs to be addressed. The loss of this group’s social capital means society will lose the role models and leadership with the skills and abilities to prepare the next generation.

TJ identifies activities needed in his community in order for him to feel connected again.

TJ Activities that are geared for people over fifty. And I sure as hell don't consider myself a senior citizen, by any stretch of the imagination. And I don't see where there are any activities or any roles for people my age, other than what we throw ourselves into, I don't, I don't, you know, I think that it's almost like we live for our children and get them connected to what, you know, what's going on in the community and then sit back and you go to work, you come home, you raise your family, and then you go to bed, get up and go to work. You know, that's just how it is. And it's like, for me, it used to be every day I felt like I wanted to do something. Now it's like Saturday and Sunday are my two days to be part of the community. So as you get older, you can't get as connected, you know.

This speaks to what Thoit (1983) says about a person’s lifecycle. However, it is much more. In order to get people engaged, activities reflecting multiple interests have to be created.

Another way to encourage community involvement is to create opportunities so that people can overcome concerns or misperceptions about participation. In the story PD shares we learn how this can occur. She talks about the time when she was between jobs and decided
to volunteer for a church activity. Initially, she thought she was going there to help them out. PD says she did not see herself as a partner. However, that perspective changed as she carried out her volunteer responsibilities, she realized that she no longer saw herself as an outsider who was only going to be there for a short time. She says she incorporated the experience in her life. The external becomes internal and integrated into her being.

PD And it wasn't until I completed that first week that it became obvious to me that, that we were in this together and then I became more effective at what I was doing. At first, I was another person, and I was keeping some law and order, and uh, organizing stuff. But the second week, I started really feeling it. Probably the way my aunt originally wanted me to, anyway. Um, and by the third week, I was like, on it. And I was supposed to be looking for a job, but there I was, volunteering, and I was preparing my little lesson plan, and um, talking with them, you know, while they were waiting for their parents to pick them up and stuff. It was a very different experience, once I started looking at it different. So I think that then for me was when it suddenly became incorporated into my life and not just, I'm going to go down and do this.

All too often we believe that changing another’s or our own attitude toward something takes a lot of time, energy, and effort. Yet from PD’s story we see the ease with which it can be done. In fact, it may simply be part of the process of becoming a member of a community.

The discussion thus far has been focused on the contributions of members. However, the interviewees recognize the potential contributions of non-members. CT’s reference to the Nation of Islam is a perfect example of how non-members from two different communities can work together for the benefit of one community or another.

CT An example is the Nation of Islam, as a community the people who follow the Islamic faith and have a uh perspective on the, the racial situation in uh the situation for African American people in this country. Uh, they are a community of worshipers who aren’t uh part of the membership of that community but identified themselves with the community and its interests.

Individuals as well as institutions recognize the value and contributions of non-members. The partnership between the Nation of Islam and the black community is a
successful model of the way in which different religious and philosophical communities forge a long-standing relationship.

Community in everyday life

For all of the participants community is experienced and reflected in everyday life. In fact, community is at the intersection between the daily activities of living and work. The differences lie in both the ways in which everyday community is experienced and whether or not there is a difference between an individual’s personal and professional definitions of community. Everyday community is civic participation and engagement mediated by time, priorities, and interests. This community experience happens in different locations, under various circumstances, within and across communities, and is highly personalized.

Community occurs in the family, workplace, church, special interest associations or groups, social events, and in public spaces and places. The environment or context of community is important but so are the manner, level of commitment, and circumstances of engagement. People involve themselves in formal and informal associational relationships. Often the reasons for that involvement are instrumental, expressive, or a combination of both.

Family – Community Metaphor and Manifestation

The interviewees believe that family is both a metaphor and manifestation of community. In the hierarchy of community, family is the first priority. Relatives and surrogates socialize a person to community and instill a sense of commitment to members. MGB says that her family’s experience is a perfect example of community.

MGB  Well, all right, this is the best example I can give you. My mother is eighty-five years old. I have two sisters and a brother. There are four of us. And at some point we had to come together. My Mom was living by herself. We had to come together and we had to decide what we were gonna do, 'cuz clearly my Mom felt she was capable of handling it and we had to determine what, we had to determine whether we were strong enough to be able to
make the decision for my mother. And whether we were strong enough to be able to face her and tell her that we were making the decision for her.

She acknowledges this was an awkward situation for everyone. Their mother was not going to agree to do anything that might interfere with her independence. MGB and her siblings had no choice but to intervene. She says working together was a responsibility of their community membership.

MGB  So my sisters and my brother and I we all had to decide what each one of us could handle relative to all the things that we needed to do for our mother. And, fortunately, uh, you know, and this really has to do with our upbringing. I mean I can't contribute it to anything else but that. We didn't get angry with each other. We didn't get all bent out of shape 'cuz now Momma's getting old and, you know, we have to take responsibility. We were ready. The time was right. We all realized it. We came together as a cohesive group and we decided we'll dole out the responsibility. Everybody has their responsibility and they're taking, they're dealing with it.

MGB extends her family's act of community to the broader issues of civic participation and responsibility of community in our society. She associates her family's private problem with the issues in public realm and says that the responsibility her siblings and she have within her family is not unlike what community members have in the larger society. Each member has a role to play in supporting and sustaining a healthy and strong community. As in the family, community members have roles, responsibilities, and obligations that they are expected to meet.

MGB  So and that's the same thing in a community. It doesn't change. That fundamental responsibility does not change, but being able to recognize it and then to act upon it, sometimes can be missed by a lot of people. And so it has to come through the teaching, you know, and a lot of that is you may not get at home, but you get it over at your neighbor's house, you know, but if there's no extension of that arm, welcome to the neighborhood, you know, glad to see you, you know, and, and come on into this family of people who live here, then your children just are limited, extremely limited.

This story and MGB's analysis of the situation clearly establishes the relationship between the internal dynamics within her family and those dynamics of a community and its members. Under certain circumstances, tasks or activities need to be performed and it is the
responsibility of any member who is there at the time to carry them. From a community organizing or civic education standpoint, it is important for people to understand that they are the ones being relied upon to meet the challenge.

In the middle of discussing this example of a family (a community) making some difficult choices. MGB talks for the first time about one of the reasons she engages in social actions. She tells the story because it is the basis for her ideas of taking on leadership and responsibility, without any fear. Here is what she says about the situation with the young people at a church she attended as a young girl.

MGB Um, sort of my first social action activity involved my church. When they took, when they decided they were going to close, take the minister out of our church, who, in fact, was addressing the needs of the young people and they thought that he wasn't addressing the needs of the seniors. And the young people rebelled and actually held a, a picket around the church administration, and I think the same thing. I think, you know, if I had not, uh, if I had not awoken every morning and sat in my mother's kitchen when my mother and grandmother entered into political conversations every single morning. And most of it had to deal with some kind of social issue, that I don't think I would have been even ready for, at twelve years old, to be involved in a social movement regarding my minister. I don't think the consciousness of that would have been real for me. And, and that's the kind of teaching that I'm talking about. Teaching by behavior.

The care for their elderly parent is an indicator of community responsibility. While at the same time serves as an example of what MGB refers to as teaching by behavior. It is interesting that the decline of civil society cultural critics do not discuss our society’s attitude and treatment of the elderly or adult children and their parents as a point on the gemeinschaft-gesselschaft continuum.

MGB So and that's the same thing in a community. It doesn't change. That fundamental responsibility does not change, but being able to recognize it and then to act upon it, sometimes can be missed by a lot of people. And so it has to come through the teaching, you know, and a lot of that is you may not get at home, but you get it over at your neighbor's house, you know, but if there's no extension of that arm, welcome to the neighborhood, you know, glad to see you, you know, and, and come on into this family of people who live here, then your children just are limited, extremely limited.
Community members need to be prepared because at any moment they may be called upon to collaborate with different groups, family members, or community institutions.

Family as community in TJ’s life is in some ways the perfect case to use as an ideal type. TJ’s life is filled with acts of community. He is a committed father and grandfather; he attends family gatherings and is there for his friends when they need his help. As he considers how he experiences community, he reflects upon his relationships with his two sons and friends. The following narrative walks us through the different moments of community in TJ’s personal life.

TJ Yeah. I mean, I mean one of my sons is away at school; but we, you know, we'll talk; you know, a couple, three times a week and it’s only a 40 minute drive and sometimes he comes home on weekends. And we do things together regularly and my older son, even though he's married, I mean we have activities that we do together. I mean we both belong to [the Corps] and, ah, we do that.

Ah, so I've always been involved with them. Ah, I have friends that are part of my extended family that regularly, every Sunday, we meet, have breakfast, sit and talk for an hour and a half or so. There's a group that goes, anywhere from four to six people depending on, you know, who's away on vacation or who isn't feeling well, um, and we'll get together. We'll go to movies. We'll go, to, you know, a concert, ah, a play. You know, go to [the] Art Gallery. Um, one of them is kind of like my, you know, one of my, you know, adopted sisters so to speak. She's into crafts so when she has a crafts show, I go there, you know, help her set up and sometimes if she's too busy, I'll, you know, I'll stand there and try to sell some of, some of the pieces that she designs and makes herself.

Um, my other adopted sister, (inaudible), she has cookouts during the summer. When her kids bring their grandkids, I'll play with them just like they're one of my own. In fact, I'm pretty much not allowed to play with them too much because I teach them, I teach them how to do things that make grandma and grandpa mad, but you know, I enjoy, you know. You know, that kind of thing so, um, I do -- it's family, 'cuz for me family's important, more important than my job.

JF, PD, NC, and ROB also identify family with community, but TJ is the only one who speaks about it at length and describes how integral family is to his life. In the hierarchy of community, family is the first and most significant community in each of their lives. All of the other communities and memberships in their lives follow.
Um, I let them know that they matter. I tell them that this is their life. I'm just here. I'm just a piece of the puzzle to this life. I'm here to add onto a couple of more pieces so we can put this puzzle together, but you're the only one who can finish this puzzle, not me. Um, I even come down to their level, whether it's, wherever. I come down to them because I want them to be equal. I want us to be equal. I'm not up here. I'm coming down here, but as I'm growing, you're going to grow with me, because I'm bringing you there with me. We're not ever, right now, going to be separated. AP, female

As there is community in the family, there is the community in the workplace. The workplace community is defined by the organization and organizational culture. For example, organizationally it can be based upon geography, target population, mission or vision of the Executive Director, or an organization’s Board of Directors. The workplace community is also a function of interpersonal dynamics. DB, TJ, RC, VB, and AH operate within the parameters of community determined by a combination of target population, service delivery area or neighborhood boundary. AP’s and VJ’s jobs are focused on a specific target population.

Community as vocation or motivation is the most dynamic experience of everyday community in the public sphere. Routinely, the member (employee or client) is required to be ‘in moments’ of community. Moments of community are the interpersonal interactions and exchanges between employees and clients. The terms of the individual exchanges may vary and will depend upon the need, services, mission of the agency, and personalities of the individuals involved. However, that does not change the fact that there can be moments of community in carrying out the responsibilities of a job.

The work of DB, RC, AH, and AP, are examples of community as vocation. The focus of their professional lives is community; sometimes defined by a geographical area or a combination of a particular population and geographical area. VJ and PD infuse their work
with their sense of self and responsibility to others. When NC, GP, and DB retired, they each sought employment that would allow them to use their skills developed through previous careers. Each felt an obligation to make a contribution to their communities. NC and GP identified the black community as the community they felt the need and responsibility to contribute professionally. DB focused on his childhood community, a predominantly African American neighborhood.

What motivates individuals who choose community as a vocation varies. For instance, the desire to serve community through employment may develop from nurturing and guidance from family members and role models at different stages in a person’s social and professional development. This is the experience of DB. He is a middle-aged male who retired from a job and felt compelled to return to work in the community of his childhood. In the selected text from his narrative, DB discusses the moment when he made the decision to apply the skills he developed over the years to work in the neighborhood. He says,

DB …But anyways, when I sat down, and I started to take a look at, geez, what am I going to do outside of here – this is when some of the spiritual development started to come in place. So I started bulleting all the things that I had done, uh, while I was there. You know, and I looked at that, and it was impressive. It was very impressive. All the different committees, all the different things that I did to help that agency, you know. But it was all within the confines of those walls. And it was like a voice just dropped in my head and said you know this is great, but you gotta do it outside of here. You know, you gotta go outside these walls. And that’s almost exactly what I heard. You gotta go outside these walls, and you have to do this out there, you know, and so that became kind of like this little nag, nag, nag, nag. And again, um, when I started to turn around and take a look at my community, take a look at where we lived, and what was going on, and how people were living, and, uh, to bring my new found knowledge back and use it.

His accomplishments prepared him for the work he needs to do in the neighborhood. It is his honest self-reflection that enables him to make the decision to leave his job.18

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18 DB and his family live in a suburb not far from the city.
DB is driven by a sense of identification with and an appreciation of the community of his youth. The contrast between his childhood experiences and what people experience today motivates him to help rebuild the neighborhood.

DB: Um, I was very disappointed. Um, I mean, honestly speaking, the jails, the sense of hopelessness in the jails. Um, meeting with parents, you know, um, watching people as they came, and some people hadn’t changed in a lot of years. And then some people just got worse. Uh, but nevertheless, this was still our community. And so, I, I began to see it for what it really was. I don’t think growing up as a child, I paid attention to a lot of things. I came back as an adult [DB left his hometown and returned after 25 years], and I began to really see and understand uh, what types of things were going on. Um, and then why it was that we are struggling in so many areas here and it’s really not that big of a deal. We can overcome some of these things. Uh, and so that kind of, you know, fueled me to, you know, continue to, even though I didn’t like a lot of what I saw. To try to do something about it. The other thing was that um, I saw a lot of things, so I couldn’t do something about everything.

DB’s desire to support his community provided led to his post-retirement decision. DB works with incarcerated youths and their families. He sees himself as a friend and insider; however, he is not viewed in a similar way by a number of the residents in the community. To them, he is an outsider. Territoriality and distrust are some of the obstacles he faces.

DB: Well, boy, I tell you, you’d almost have to, you’d be breaking that community down. You know. Because there’s some parts of the community I can’t be in. You know. And it’s just based on what I stand for, and how I’m going to conduct myself. You know, and on a large scale, I think everybody that’s – has the bet interest of our city uh, belongs. You know, and can actively participate and maintain in governing that. And, then, as you begin to break down the layers of what that governor, governorship means. It begins (inaudible) many people, you know, so many people begin to hang out with other parts of the community. That eliminates folks. Or will (inaudible) or you will, even in your present, being in the community, uh, you might not be embraced, as openly, uh, and as readily. ... You know, so there’s some areas where um, you can be welcome into the um, community. Um, in a lot of ways, and there are some portions of the community that you just won’t be able to um, um participate in.

Good intentions or being well-intentioned are not always enough in community work. A desire to help and a commitment to serve does not mean acceptance by all community members.

Institutional changes and decisions affect community and personal behaviors. DB says forty (40) years of government fiscal policies aimed at reducing or eliminating youth programs
are factors contributing to the changes he sees in his community. As he considers those changes and society in general he remarks that he sees a change in the young people. He says there is a sense of entitlement among them. DB views this as a sign of a generational change in attitudes. Other study participants comment on the generational changes they see in contemporary society. CG, in her interview, also talks about the changing attitudes of her generation in terms of community engagement and participation in activities that support the community. She is not overly optimistic about the likelihood of members of her generation carrying on the traditions of previous generations in terms of civic engagement and community commitment. DB reflects on his experience with young people and says,

   DB ... I don’t sense that young people do a lot of long-term planning, you know? When we go into the jails, and we talk to these young guys, and these guys are between 16 and 25, 30 years old, and we talk to them about putting a plan together, I talk to them about working 20 years someplace to earn the payoff, and they are not trying to hear that. If it doesn’t have the immediate gratification ... I talk with young men, uh, consistently, and they want to go straight to 80,000 year, you know. Um, can’t work for nothing else. I won’t do it. I’ll steal. I’ll rob. What do you mean I can’t make 80 grand? You know. And they, and they can. But it’s, it’s short-term, you know. You know, it’s short-term; it’s illegal, um, and it’s not a lifestyle that you’re comfortable with. You know, and r—it’s really hard to get them to buy into that you’re going to have to work, and you are going to reap what you sow. But um, it’s gotta sow. And that is your time, you know, towards education, towards training, towards something, and then you gotta work someplace for, consistently, to be able to maintain the type of lifestyle that you establish, you know. And, no. A lot of them are not interested. And then, also, a lot of them that are living on the wild end, they don’t feel that they’ll be around, and it doesn’t matter. I won’t live to be 30. You know, so why should I make plans for anything happening at 50?

DB is not discouraged when he hears young people talk about not having a future, dying young, or wanting immediate gratification and satisfaction. He also does not accept their worldview.

   Seeing small changes in the community or in the lives of the young people are enough for DB because he understands that any positive change can have a significant impact on the neighborhood.
DB  

[A]ny small change, small change, which has taken place drives me for big change. And I believe it. And I believe that if we continue to just do what we’re doing, um, um, we will make that much of a difference. I think that when we get to a place where um, I’m going to kind of take a step back from what I’m doing, I’d like to be able to have pushed the bar quite a ways. Um, while I was on my watch. You know.

Perhaps this is a lesson for all of us. Small steps added together cover great distances. DB understands that he will not able to make sweeping changes in the neighborhood. However, if he takes on one project or one individual at a time the successes will be compounded and he is confident that he will make significant inroads within the community.

RC is an Executive Director of a community-based organization. Like DB, he incorporates definitions or expressions of community in his professional life. His organization began as an on-campus club at a community college. From there, he received his first grant to begin offering social services. After more than twenty years in business, his organization has grown to become a cornerstone in the community.

RC believes it is important for a member to take responsibility for supporting the community. That is why he created his agency and maintains offices in the black community. He feels that the larger community’s interests are aligned with his because he sees himself as the community. He says,

RC  One of the reasons why I'm even [here] is because after college, uh during college, I realized that [target population] were not getting treated the same as [others] at the [hospital], at the [Center] program. Um, we weren't using benefits as much as [others] were. And there was nobody really to advocate for the [target population] other than themselves. And I um I wanted to be in the black community because part of the problem is that there are no institutions for [target population] other than the social ones. The [local] Post, sort of a social [military] club, but still has to follow all of the rules of a larger organization -- national organization. There's nothing in the black community um other than [organization] which says to [target population] that you've found someplace to come to where we will fight uh for your rights and we'll inform you about uh your, your, um entitlements and then we also can train you, and counsel and just be a place. And we wanted to make sure we were in the black community. That was real important. That we kept our organization, not, not to have them, have them uh be subject to going downtown, which is part of the problem, I think. People of color always have to go somewhere else in order to get something in the city .... They, they
always have to end up goin' someplace, not being felt -- not, and they don't feel welcomed when they get there.

RC is an active volunteer and involved with organizations that are different from the one he manages. For example, he is a member of a neighborhood association, a multi-service community agency, a professional social workers association, and a member of several local government boards and commissions. In addition, he is also a member of a number of fraternal and military associations, and a member of several national commissions and advisory groups. Many of his national affiliations focus on the population his organization serves.

RC considers his community involvement as formal civic engagement.

RC I think, I, I, probably fall into the formally serve as a volunteer. Uh, most of the time I'm, I'm really, I'm really involved to the point of, in some form of uh leadership role as a volunteer. Uh very seldom, I'm either on the Board, or, you know, something like that. I very seldom just um, like I'm -- well, there's one volunteer thing that I, I do at this time. It's the uh, with [a local middle school] ... Where the kids uh write to someone in your neighborhood and then you form a relationship with that student. You, uh, I've, I've done that twice. I had a boy and a girl. Uh, so that's probably, that's a true volunteer. I mean, it's just, you know, I'm not in any big role; I'm just like any other participating [volunteer].

His membership communities are diverse and he chooses to take on leadership roles in each of them. PD, another interviewee, assumes leadership roles in her communities, as well. She volunteers formally and informally and participates in communities that are part of the private and public spheres of her life.

The agency RC built and his civic activities play an advocacy role on behalf of the black community. There is a clear connection, for him, as to the ways in which his activities are related to the Black community that he identifies with. In the following excerpt, he describes the connection.

RC In whatever capacity, board or commission that I'm involved in, I advocate for the African American uh participation -- their percentage be increased or if there is, there is no participation, um, I advocate for them to be included and, wherever, I can have anything to, to say about it, and influence it, I do that.
Um, organizations that I sit on boards of such as uh the [local neighborhood program], um I'm President of my uh local tenants, not -- excuse me, local uh neighborhood association, um, and I'm uh involved with the [local chapter of a professional organization]. All of these organizations, I feel I'm able to contribute to the black experience by being able to influence jobs, influence housing. Uh, with my neighborhood association, we've just uh built 11 units of affordable housing. A long hard, fought battle. Uh, and among -- with the [local community agency], just cemented a-an agreement with uh, the industrial complex that's over by the city hospital. And beyond, for a jobs program, for the uh the local residents uh. I've -- in a larger sense I've been appointed to the [local] Commission. One of the first two blacks, ever, to be appointed to the [local] uh Commission in the city .... In the history of the city... And uh, the only reason why I accepted it was because I felt that I would have a way of impacting future developments, uh ability to hire the uh community residents -- particularly from my community. I wanna ensure that [the local job ordinance for residents] gets enforced.

Just as DB and his organization create ties with the surrounding community, RC's policies of hiring local people and actively recruiting members of the community to participate on the agency's board, create similar ties in RC's community. RC sees this as an important demonstration of support and commitment to the community. It is not enough to locate in the neighborhood or provide services to local residents. A community-based organization has to do more. His organization prefers to recruit and employ community residents to fill vacant staff and board positions. When the organization conducted its outreach for Board members in the past, it appealed to a sense of kinship. Over time, this strategy was reconsidered and a decision was made to include individuals who believe in and, or support the goals and mission of RC's agency. This change in the recruitment process is in recognition of the need to reach out to people with skills that can benefit the agency and the larger community.

RC Because we really wanna, we, yeah, I'm of the belief that if we're a community-based organization, we should hire people from the community. I believe that the Board members should be from the community in order for them to be sensitive to it. Although I now am looking at board membership, uh, from a different perspective, from an economic perspective. We, now, and it'd be nice if we could get a banker from the community be on the board. That's what we would go for. However, if we need a banker on the board, I suggest that it doesn't matter whether the banker is from the community or not if they have a belief in what we do. And, have bought into the mission of what we do.
The agency’s adaptive behavior is similar to what PK does as she approaches civic engagement in her neighborhood. The action taken by the agency shows that just as individuals sometimes must adapt to the opportunities for community participation, organizations will do the same. The decisions made by RC and PK highlight the potential variability of membership criteria. In their situations, the basis of membership or identifying an individual who may meet the criteria for membership are based upon the belief in the fundamental compatibility on core values and interests.

The reconsideration of membership criteria is an indication that the circumstances of membership can be situationally-defined. The implication of this finding is that as social commentators consider quantitative or statistical data about membership in organizations, engagement in activities, or numbers of organizations, some consideration will need to be given to whether or not the basis of membership (i.e., membership criteria) has changed and if so, how eligible members are responding to the change.

The positive contributions that his organization and he continue to make are part of what keeps him involved in his work. He says,

RC I think that what keeps me here is uh every time I decide, ‘well, you know, let’s go on make some money and get outta here um’ I’ll look around and I’ll see that more and more [people] are gettin’ homeless. More and more people are coming for turkeys at Christmas and I’ll find somebody who will say you know I got that job that your organization sent me out on. And I’m, now I’m married and got two kids and I’m livin’ really good. I, I don’t feel that we’ve institutionalized enough to where um, if myself as the Executive Director [were] to leave that it would have no effect on our delivery. I think um, maybe in a year or so, that will change because we have, we are turnin’ a million-dollar corner this year. We will be makin’ over a million dollars in operating money. So, um, I’ll feel much more comfortable about that once that happens.

What motivates DB and RC to continue their efforts is the unmet need they see in their respective communities. As well as a belief that they have a responsibility to help find solutions to the issues facing the communities and members their agencies target. Each man is
realistic about the extent to which his institution can impact the physical and social conditions of those communities. The two Executive Directors use their personal histories and experiences to guide their work and the choices they make as volunteers. These subtleties are not captured in the surveys Putnam and Etzioni use in their research. The Executive Directors are also able to create the organizational culture to support and encourage community in the workplace and delivery of services. The next two interviewees, AH and AP are in non-supervisory positions in their community-based organizations and they also bring a sense of obligation and community affinity to the daily activities on their jobs.

AH is a counselor in RC's organization. His approach to the work is very similar to AP’s. He inspires and connects with black males because he understands what they are going through. AH uses the experiences of the sea island community he grew up in to help him assist his clients. AP uses the lessons of community she learned while a client of the agency where she works. 19 She interacts with her agency’s clients in a personal and empowering way.

AH relates community to humanity. This is also the way he approaches his counseling position. One of his goals is to help his clients develop tools to feel in control of their lives. He taps into his historical experience of community to assist him in maintaining a sense of balance. He uses that collective or social memory to assist the agency’s clients in handling negative influences and avoiding self-destructive behaviors. This social memory of community reminds him of what is normal, real, and truly important. In the following excerpt from his interview, AH describes how he uses his internalized community to inform his present.

AH    In fact, I use it every day in whatever I do because it gives me an opportunity to, to see what’s happening and to know what, what normalcy is. You see. It gives me that balance that I can reflect, even with the clients that I see I can say, "Well, look. No. There's

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19 At the time of the interview, it had been 12 years since she had been a client.
something greater here than you actually realize. Let me help you get back to this. You see, because I know what your history is, you see. And what you're doing, you're acting out somebody else's reality at this point." So, it gives me balance, gives me an opportunity to look at the whole perspective and see it totally, differently.

This personal history, reinforced by his family and social memory, play an important role in his approach to the world and the work. His close-knit family and ability to reach back and bring forth the traditions and feelings of community fortify him. It is through this process he strengthens and empowers his clients. His upbringing and experiences provide him with a unique sense of community and self.

AH and AP have different sources of their experiences of community and yet they use and rely upon them in similar ways. In AP’s professional life, community is a combination of vocation and motivation. She provides housing counseling and placement services to her agency’s clients. Her identification and sense of affinity with the clients lead her to interact with them as family and community members. AP’s personal history, particularly the part of it related to her experience as a client, combined with the guiding principles of the agency enable her to show empathy for her clients. When she assists her clients with housing counseling and placement, she demonstrates her understanding and appreciation of the issues they deal with.

AP    Well, the first thing, what I do with the young ladies when they come here, because when the women come here, you have to really look at they've been battered. Not literally battered, but from society. They've been battered and beaten till they're at their last leg. So, when they come here to another facility where there's staff members, of course they're going to look at us through different eyes. Well, I let them know that I'm just as equal as they are. I let them know that I'm no better.

And I teach them. And as you state, say, yes, of course, it's not intentionally, but it's something that just comes out because that's who I am. Um, I let them know that they matter. I tell them that this is their life. I'm just here. I'm just a piece of the puzzle to this life. I'm here to add onto a couple of more pieces so we can put this puzzle together, but you're the only one who can finish this puzzle, not me. Um, I even come down to their level, whether it's, wherever. I come down to them because I want them to be equal. I want us to be equal. I'm not up here. I'm coming down here, but as I'm growing, you're going to grow with me, because I'm bringing you there with me.
RC expresses a similar sensibility when he says, “... I believe that, that uh people who have should help, um, bring somebody up. It’s, it’s not enough for you to have arrived but whom have you helped along the way, and, supported them so that they can also um, um, arrive?” AP is committed to assisting the clients of her agency to become empowered and self-sufficient.

On the job, AP exemplifies the spirit and ethos of the agency. Symbolically, her clients are an extension of herself and she treats them that way.

AP [She tells her clients]... I want you to feel that you're part of me. You're part of my family, regardless of where you're living. I see every family that walks inside [those] doors Marlene, as my family. Nobody -- It's me walking through the doors like I did 12 years ago. It's the same feeling. Um, it's the same feeling of, I know what I wanted when I came through here. I wanted someone to hear me. To listen, not to judge me, not to say, uh, what did you give up? I wanted people to know that I can start over.

... So, that same stuff that I got while I was here, the same thing I'm going -- So, I keep that old stuff that [the agency] had from the past. And I keep that here. And I give it to anyone that wants it. Um, it's part of who we are, but it's part of [the agency]. [The agency] made me into this person and I'm not going to keep it. I'm going to give it to someone else. I'm going to give it to you got a piece, you got a piece, you got a piece. Um, and it's just a connection to let you know that I'll always be here. I'm that core. I'll always be here. If you need me, no matter when or for what, call me. And they do do that, so -- And people, they do -- All the women here, that have left here after all the years, they still get that -- When they see me, they'll say, a-h-h [Annie]! They still get that feeling of I was their friend not just a staff person that was doing their job. I was truly their, everybody's friend. I liked everyone here, and I tried to instill that in all of them. We don't have to like each other, but we have to respect each other. And I respect them just as much as they respect me. Just because you're homeless, doesn't mean anything to me. You can teach me something, and I can teach you. And we do, we learn together.

The narratives of the lives of DB, RC, AH, and AP reflect community as vocation and motivation. Through them we get a sense of the power of the individual in transmitting and perpetuating a spirit of community. These individuals are motivated by a desire to serve, make a difference, and help others create better lives. AP's story, in particular, illustrates the potential power and influence of a community organization. Her organization is committed to the cultivation of human potential (social capital) of its clients and its employees. Her personal
experience, combined with the organizational culture and philosophy, are the underpinnings of the approach she takes in her work. The agency’s clients are learning community by example. This transmission of culture and community through community-based organizations is not addressed in the decline of civil society commentary. The experiences of these interviewees present the opportunity to consider the impact of institutional cultures and collective memory on the persistence of community and the production of social capital.

The next two interviewees, VJ and PD, do not compartmentalize community in their lives. They each see community as being part of who they are and what they do. This is similar to one of the case studies presented in Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s research.

In her life the boundaries between work and play, and between politics and business are not clearly drawn; each enlivens and shapes the other. “The more you are involved in the community and the more people feel good about you, the more they will want to do business with you. There is a power in relatedness and connectedness of service between business and volunteer work…It is all about relationships with people” (1995:485).

VJ is the Director of Counseling where AP works and makes no distinction between her personal and professional definitions of community. Her professional life is a reflection of the defining principles and characteristics of her personal sense of community. She explains it this way,

VJ They intertwine. It's not about trying to keep them separate. It's, it's how I choose to be on this planet. Okay. As opposed to trying to put myself in segments or slices, and say, you know, this is my job and this is my personal life and this is my social life. They're intertwined. Um, there's a degree of separation. I may not socialize with my work colleagues but the people that I socialize with generally have the same kinds of values and do similar work that I do. We share similar interests. Um, and we sort of share a worldview. You know, it could be from different perspectives, but we share a similar worldview.

There is a perfect match for between VJ’s work and her sense of community and responsibility. Management’s support and the organizational culture support her and cultivate her sense of community and responsibility. Therefore, it makes it possible to integrate her
sense of self with the work. The self being referred to is not motivated by ego or personal gain. VJ’s sense of self is intertwined with issues of social justice, equity, and fairness. She values the work that she does in part because she feels she is able to address some of the inequities in our society and its social structure.

VJ Okay. I said before that I believe people should have access to education; should be able to live in a healthy, clean environment; should have opportunity for economic and social fulfillment. Yet, we have a segment of our society for which some of those things are very, very difficult. And there are true and obvious structures in place that keep those things from happening for people. And I feel that if I can be an instrument in the programs that I work in and the work that I do and (a) help people find the inner resources to deal with some of those structures that are working against them, and (b) work in an advocacy capacity to help dismantle some of those structures at the same time, then I feel that I’m doing the work that I feel most attached to; that I feel most strongly about.

VJ and twelve (12) of the other study participants are truly motivated by altruism and a strong desire to be part of a positive and affirming process for personal growth and change for their respective organizations’ constituencies.

PD is similar to VJ in that she sees community as being fully integrated into who she is and what she does. She formally and informally volunteers and says that community is a part of all areas of her life. What motivates her is a sense of responsibility that she says is automatic and the need she feels to participate in the life of the community she is a member of. She recognizes that she has multiple community memberships and that each require a different set of skills and level of commitment.

PD is active on the job working with students at the college, in her church conducting self-esteem workshops for young people, with her family because she is raising her niece and finally, she is very involved in her neighborhood.

PD I, I think that I basically behave the same way in all of my, all the areas of my life. Um, without bragging, I’m considered a leader, even if I am not formally in a position of leadership. So, that in my household, even when I was married, I was considered a leader in, in the household. And, in my church, I go to the [religious organization name] even though I’m not
a commissioned officer, I'm what they would call a local soldier. Um, when things happen, people often turn to me and say well, what's goin' on? What do you know about this? So, I'm, I'm kinda like um a catalyst (laughing) in the positive sense of the word. Um, in that when I see things happening and I want to know about them, then I'll step up to the bat and, and get the information and the resources. And, and, I do that in my neighborhood too. If I know that a coupla people have been broken into, I'll share that with other people so that everybody can have um, the same information. They can be alerted. So, um, I, although I think this takes a lot of time, sometimes, I think that it, it would be very hard for me to ha -- assume one role and one position and then another role, a lesser role in another situation.

In response to the question as to whether or not her activities and desire to serve are automatic, something akin to second nature she says,

PD  Um, it's probably both. It's probably both. It is automatic. And it is something that I feel like I have to do. It is, it's a responsibility that I feel should assume. And, I've, I've been that way for a long time. So now it's like second nature. Um, I probably could not be involved in something if somethin' was going on -- if somethin' -- For instance, last year, we, we had this whole thing with the [some of our] students here. And I work with [group of] students. So, none of the students that were involved in the controversy are the population that I work with. But I felt, I'm, I'm a member of that group. I'm a black female. So, I, I had to be involved in it. And, I didn't apologize for that. I just said I'm a member of both groups. I'm an administrator at the school but I'm also a black female and, I have somethin' I wanna say. And I think that people accepted it in that spirit. It wasn't I'm a know-it-all and you don't know 'cause you're not black. It wasn't that. It was let me show you how we're thinking about this. You know, let me tell you a little of the black experience. So that people could at least be exposed to another point of view because, the people that I was talking to are all majority.

From this excerpt from her interview, we learn that becoming involved in community is not limited to interests, values, or shared histories, but may also be grounded in the individual's sense of self and identity.

PD and LS both talk about their experiences of community in terms of feeling the need to give and to participate. It is an automatic and conscious act or set of acts that lack self-consciousness on the part of these two individuals. This concept of need as a motivating force in civic engagement is worth exploring as a research subject.

ROB says community is expressed everyday by the act of meaningful participation. What makes participation meaningful is that is it active or proactive. For example, when people attend meetings or join organizations they should be engaged in the process.
should take on leadership and non-leadership roles. Like the other participants, ROB chooses activities or causes that in keeping with his interests or values. The extent of his publicly demonstrated commitment to any one activity is subject to the limits of his time and other obligations.

ROB Uh, I think, it goes back to that fundamental ingredient, participation. I express it by my participation. If it’s something that has interest to me and then, and I feel strong enough about it, then I make the effort to participate. Um, with, with that being said though, uh, you know, with life changes you can’t always be involved in what interests you per se. You have to begin to prioritize because there are a lot of things out there that could, could, um, usurp your time and your energies. Uh, but I think that’s the primary way people express it. They become involved and they get engaged. And I think to a large degree the same thing for experiencing it. You experience community by engaging people, engaging issues, engaging organizations. And I think interpersonal relationships are a big part of that so, you know, if you get involved with an organization, that you’re engaged with the people that are involved. You don’t just go and sit and not be a part of the process. You, you get in. You talk about the issues and you, you know, make your feelings or your understanding or your interests known.

As he gives examples of his community activities, we see that for most of us community is really everyday life. For example, he is part of a workplace community; he has a family and he actively participates in a number of organizations that share his beliefs and values. He has lunch with colleagues, volunteers for a black male mentoring program, and spends time with his wife and child. He describes the experiences of countless people when he says,

ROB Um, I, like I say, I come to work every day and, um, I engage my colleagues on a daily basis, uh, talk with them. At times go to lunch with them and, uh, I’m just becoming a part of this community per se. I, I do my volunteer work with, with [a group of] black men and a Saturday program working with kids. Uh, I participate where, where I can and what my time allows. With my family, it’s just spending time with my family. Spending time with my son. Spending time with my wife and doing things that are just, you know, of interest to us, specific interest to us. That sometimes may just involve sitting and watching television where, you know, we do it as a family or sitting and reading or going to the bookstore or going to the library or stuff like that, you know.

ROB acknowledges that people have different levels of community involvement. Rather than make a judgment about how much and under what conditions an individual
becomes involved, his interest is in whether or not the participation is meaningful. Therefore, the question is not how often but what is the person doing when participating?

**ROB** But with, with, with, with all of that, you just sometimes you can’t do it as much of it as you [want], but you stay a part of a community by your meaningful engagement. So if you're not, if you’re not able to be engaged all the time or as regular as you like, as long as your engagement is meaningful, then I think that, I think that it represents your, your experience or expression of community.

This perception of participation is interesting in the study of the decline of civil society and the loss of social capital because the measure of social commitment is not the amount of participation (i.e., number of organizations or volunteer hours) but whether or not there is civic engagement and the type of activity a person participates in when engaged (i.e., the role and responsibilities a person takes on or whether the participation is active or passive).

**LS** is another study participant for whom formal and informal volunteering has been a part of her life. **LS** has a long-standing commitment to community. When she was in her sixties, she was a member of a neighborhood association whose volunteers help seniors in the area. Association members run errands, assist with shopping and getting the seniors to appointment, and organize activities. What is interesting is that each volunteer is assigned a group of seniors and are responsible for maintaining contact with them.

While a member of the association, **LS** is closely connected to the community. She has daily contact with members and is assigned specific individuals to assist. **LS’** and the other association volunteers’ activities are examples of what **ROB** refers to as meaningful community activities.

**LS** You know a lot of older people, no one will, they didn’t have anybody around to take them out so this made them happy. And then we would also, we would organize, we would go to a place called (inaudible) and you can eat all you want. So we would go there for lunch. Take them to lunch. It was (inaudible) monthly for lunch. And after lunch we would go to one of the stores, discount stores. We would pick up things at a grocery store.
The association members feel responsible for their neighbors. The seniors in the neighborhood were vulnerable and there was a history of children in the neighborhood taking advantage of them. This is one of the reasons the association made a commitment to the elderly residents in the neighborhood.

As LS considers her past volunteering experiences, it is clear that volunteering with the neighborhood association is important to her. She feels the work of the neighborhood association made a difference and fulfilled a need in the lives of the seniors. LS believes the association kept seniors from being taken advantage of. The association also let the seniors know they were not alone and offered them a real and tangible connection to others.

What the association accomplishes should not be minimized. The neighborhood organization’s activities and the positive impacts and contributions to the quality of life of the neighborhood and the senior members of the community are perfect examples of the contribution that community or not-for-profit organizations make in the lives of community members and the ongoing transmission of community and its values.

The nature, opportunity, and possibility of community engagement change when LS moves to another neighborhood to work as a cook in an independent living site and again when she buys her condominium. She continues her “community work” with the independent living group and she experiences a tremendous sense of accomplishment and personal fulfillment when she helps the residents. She says, “It was my job, but it wasn’t my job.” Even after she moves into her condominium she stays in contact with the residents. As

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20 After 6 years she sold the condo and now lives in a senior citizen complex. The move to the complex allows her to interact with her peers and become involved in the tenant association.
often as she can and when asked, she returns to help them with their errands and appointments.

As LS ages, her health restricts the ways she can participate in the community. When she reflects on the changes, there is a sense of ‘then and now’ to her civic engagement and social interactions. She is disappointed that she is no longer as active as she once was. Having people “to do for” is important to her. In fact, it is one of the things that define her life.

So, where does she experience community now? She says,

LS Now? Well, it's not like it used to be. I do call people. Certain people who are home alone and I call them and see if they need anything. And then I have a few people that I help with food because if I have extra of something, I take it to them. Not like it used to be. I'm missing a lot because I don't know of anybody that I can help and I'm a person that likes to help people. In North East [where she was involved with the neighborhood association] it was full-scale participation. You knew you had to help. ... We had a community organization. We were really close, uh, we would go and take care of the senior citizens. We found all the senior citizens that couldn't do for themselves and each of us was assigned to five and we would check on them every day, go to the store for them, go to the laundromat for them and go have them recertified on the (inaudible). And then we had little get-togethers for them and we'd take them to the park, places like that. We were members of the community.

Today, the specific tasks or activities of community engagement are different; however, the personal nature of those activities is consistent throughout her history of community participation.

Helping people is at the core of who LS is. However, age and some health problems prevent her from being as active as she once was and as a result she is both disappointed and frustrated. There are many people who still have a “heart and mind” to participate and contribute yet they are unable to. Perhaps, much of their civic engagement is in the personal sphere and involves informal acts of community. This is one aspect of civic engagement that is being overlooked in the debate about the decline of civil society. These kinds of informal
activities save lives and bring hope to many individuals, particularly those who are alone, without family, or unable to leave their homes.

Leland B. Tate’s study of the role of informal activities in community life substantiates the reality and the significance of this type of civic engagement. He writes,

There are many mutual-aid practices of a non-contractual character whereby neighbors assist neighbors without any specific contractual agreement, but with the general understanding that favors will be given in return, and that the process will be repeated from time to time (1945:159).

Tate is not saying the expectation of reciprocity is the motivation of the act. It is the unspoken agreement. This agreement is encoded in the statement, “You would do the same for me.”

The informal everyday community is not primarily instrumental.

Communitarians believe that we have become too self-centered and most of our actions are individualistic and motivated by a selfish desire. Altruistic behaviors are limited and not easily recognized. The comments and activities of the study’s participants do not support this claim. However, there is a sense among the participants that in today’s society individuals are more motivated by self interest and are not as engaged with their neighbors as others have been at other periods in history. In the case of the study group, they have seen a change in what NC refers to as neighborliness between childhood and adulthood.

Tate seems to refute a central argument in the decline of civil society debate – if you want to know what matters to people conduct research on the formal networks and relationships they have in their lives. He writes,

21If a person does not reciprocate, they may or may not receive support in the future. However, the calculus is not one of considering the previous agreement and whether those terms and conditions were met. It is not that impersonal. In a contractual arrangement you would not do business with that person again. In informal exchanges you might help and reason that the person has other issues or problems to factor into the decision.
It seems apparent that informal activities may do much to give flavor and meaning to the formal ones, and that a full understanding of formal functions can not be had by merely studying formal functions. One may well question to what extent knowledge of formal functions gives insight into the character of a community (1945:159).

We need to acknowledge the contributions being made to civil society by people who are involved in informal civic engagement. Then, find appropriate metrics for identifying and analyzing the activities people participate in. Data on what motivates participation still needs to be collected.

One of the limitations with the decline of civil society research is that it does not explore the issue using the personal experiences of the people in the studies or those who are similar. MGB uses the expression that politics is local. I suggest that community is personal. By that I mean it is ontological and practical.

Everyday community for JF is carried out through volunteerism. He is involved in church, health care, educational, and political activities. He says,

> JF Um, well, I guess one of the ways I look at it is -- I will take my philanthropic activities as a basis for my expression in terms of the sense of community. Um, um, I deem it very important to be an activist on issues, um, too, in my volunteerism, in order to look to make social change. And I've done that through my involvement with the health center movement. I've done that with my involvement at my university. Um, and, so, you know, and my family recognizes that that's a part of me. That's a part of my being, that I'm going to be involved in the, in the political and social dynamics of where I'm living. I want to have an impact on it. I want to influence it. I want to shape it. I want to change it. I'm just not going to sit idly by and allow things to just happen; I'm going to make things happen. And, you know, so I guess, for me, I've taken that sense of community that I spoke to, growing up in New York, and have translated it into my volunteerism, whereby I will try to bring the community fabric to organizational settings where I might sit.

> So, I want the community to, to address particular types of issues. So, again, ensuring that there are educational opportunities for youngsters on college campuses, and that the university is sensitive to that, I'm involved. And if there's a health care delivery -- and I'm now involved on the national board -- so from a national perspective, I'm concerned about that. So, my expression of it has been through my volunteerism.

The motivation and the common thread for his communities are that he wants to ensure the lives of people are made better, while at the same time being part of a process that
is a catalyst for change. I would submit that each of the participants in this study share the same sensibility. The difference may be in the ways in which they act upon or demonstrate these feelings.

For the majority of us, community is part of everyday living and our interactions are a reflection of community at every turn. Each of us imposes our own definitions of community on a situation. We may do it unconsciously and unless it is brought to our attention, as it was for this study’s participants, we may not realize what is happening. AH offers an interesting perspective when he says that we take our communities with us. Through socialization and identification, individuals internalize a sense of community. That process varies from person to person. However, it is no less profound or significant. AH says,

AH You know, because you basically take your community with you wherever you go, you know. Because, I mean, it's always, it's -- If you look at the aspect of, you know, you the human being, you know, and you say, "I, you know, I exist but I exist because of you," that whole nine yards, all of that comes into play. You see, so I don't see it as being limited but it, you know, it takes various forms, you know. And it's forever growing, you know. And it can be a -- It can always come up with another identity, you see -- based on the needs. I think it'll - - You know, it can transform itself and -- it's forever growing. That's how I see it.

The type of work DB, RC, AP, AH, VJ, VB, and PD perform and the manner in which they approach that work bears out AH’s point. Each of them uses definitions and experiences of community in the social and professional activities they engage in. In the case of these specific study participants, the focus is on the formal process of community engagement through their work. Other participants such as PM, KW, LMB, EH, and LS are engaged in community through an informal network of social connections and relationships.22

22 EH is also involved in her church.
As AH sees it, the relationship between community and self is ever-changing and adapting to a particular set of circumstances. Society has created complexity when there is no need. He feels that we have certain issues and concerns that are fundamental and common to every one of us. If we focus on these, as opposed to others, such as race, our relationships with each other will be simpler and probably more fulfilling. He says,

AH I think people have basic needs — and they really don’t -- It's got -- I mean it's become, it has become complex based on, let's say, race for example. Those issues have gotten in the way and made it more complex than what it really needs to be because people have basic needs. Everybody has the need to survive. You see.

The imposition of other ideas or perceptions interferes with the creation and sustainability of community.

The interview with CG uncovers a number of issues and lines of inquiry. For example, she is committed to be a positive example and role model for her peers and for the race. So, she can be seen as a Race Woman. Also, she talks about a real or authentic community. Therefore, in the hierarchy of community it is not enough to determine which communities an individual identifies with and where they rank but also whether or not the communities are perceived as true affiliations or ones that develop because of particular associational relationships or memberships.

CG volunteers for on-campus activities and remains connected to her former high school. She says, “... I feel like it's my obligation now to not be that person [who is talented and still does not succeed] but to do well and help other people to do well.” CG is an example of a person who consciously carries her community with her. She feels a deep personal responsibility to manifest community in her life but it is more than simply a desire to be a role
model for people or doing good deeds. One of the things she feels she needs to do is to ‘uplift’ the race, a motivation of a Race Woman.

CG is a Race woman.23 The following is a description of a Race Woman.

[A Race Woman is perceived to be] … sincere… she can’t capitalize on her activities like a Race Man… [she might be] forceful, outspoken, and fearless, a great advocate for race pride… devoted to the race… studies the condition of people…the Race is uppermost in her activities…you know her by the speeches she makes… she champions the rights of Negroes… active in civic affairs. … The Race Woman is idealized as a ‘fighter,’ but her associated role of ‘uplifter’ seems to be accepted with less antagonism than in the case of the Race Man. She is sometimes described as “continually showing the Negro people why they should better their conditions economically and educationally (Drake and Clayton, 1993:394-395).

She feels an obligation to carry herself in a way that reflects the best a person can be. CG feels compelled to be a role model and success, not just for her college community, but for her authentic or home community, as well. This is a perfect example of the bifurcated consciousness and two-ness that Dorothy Smith (1990) and W.E.B. DuBois (1973) refer to. CG recognizes the community of her college, her race, and her neighborhood.

In CG’s case, race, community, identity, and obligation are interrelated. However, this does not preclude making commitments to other groups, causes, or organizations. In fact, she has a loyalty and a sense of responsibility to the college and the student organizations joined on campus.

Community as a part of everyday life presents challenges and opportunities. The challenges require us to consider incorporating macrolevel (institutional and personal) models

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23 This is a reference to several statements made by RG and St. Clair Drake’s and Horace Clayton’s description of a race woman in Black Metropolis. RG works as the Executive Director of a philanthropic organization. She says that there is a tradition in black culture and society of the idea of being a race man or race woman. In her role as race woman, she wants to articulate the issues and concerns that African Americans have. She says that African American women have been denied the ‘right’ to speak for themselves and about their own experience for too long. She feels that women need to be spokespersons for the race, advocates and champions. Women committed tuh upliftin’ the race.
of behavior and community change and microlevel (personal) exchanges in our analysis. This should be done to ensure we identify and capture the ontological and phenomenological aspects of community, as well acts of community. Combined, these characteristics of community are more precise indicators of people’s relationships within, outside, and across various boundaries of community. The lessons learned will help to better inform the macrolevel and microlevel analyses as explanations for changes and conditions in contemporary society.

Circles of community

Community has many definitions, locations, and opportunities for participation. These multiple communities are the result, for example, of different roles, interests, identities, and places people identify with. Community is multidimensional on an institutional as well as a personal level. Guest and Oropesa (1984) suggest,

Many contemporary metropolitan areas are crosscut by numerous physical boundaries and a multiplicity of political-administrative districts. The net result is an urban landscape characterized by a multitude of symbolic communities, often encapsulated with each other (1984:834).

Symbolic communities are also a part of rural life. Therefore, the Guest and Oropesa analysis is applicable to the experiences of community in rural as well as urban areas.

The symbolic communities represent situations in which expressions and acts of communities exist. They are what JF refers to as ‘circles of community.’ These circles of community represent the different concepts, conditions, and interpretations by which community is created and, or experienced. After the family, the interviewees participate in communities of interest (i.e., professional, religious, ethnic or cultural associational
relationships). A geographical boundary may contextualize some of the memberships but it is not the defining characteristic of their communities.

Based upon his own experiences, JF is fully aware of the different types of communities that a person can belong to. He says,

JF  [T]he interesting part about community, [is that] there are different circles of community. You know, so, first, first and foremost you have your community consisting of your nuclear family. That's your first sense of community. The other thing may be a community in the sense of your church [inaudible] your religious life. The community might be in the sense of your social life. Community might be a part of your participation in organizational life. So, there are so many different -- And there are concentric circles of community, and my thing is, as you move amongst all of those different factors, I think the thread that ties all of them together is that the ability of one to be able to work, to make the people who are part of those communities [inaudible], and that's the thread or the cord that runs through all of those communities. But I do, I do hold that community is not singular. It is, it is, if anything, it is communities within a community.24

These multiple communities or circles of community have a common thread that connects them in his life. He believes something similar occurs in the lives of others, as well. This thread weaves together people's patchworks of community and membership.

Like JF, VJ says that community is not singular or limited to one experience, role, or identity. She recognizes that people participate in a number of different communities and for a number of reasons. While community membership is not limited to one experience, the communities themselves can be based on single or multiple dimensions. For example, VJ chooses a community because of its spiritual aspect, but that is not the only community she participates in. She believes community includes the physical and social-psychological dimensions the other participants speak about. She says,

VJ  …For me, community means people who are bound together either through blood, geographic location, common interests, common concerns. So, I think any person depending

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24 After interviewing JF, I added a question asking people about the different communities they were members of.
on what group they belong to, whether it’s familial or ethnic, or geographic, or even class will have many communities that they belong to.

In her interview, she points out that communities can be based upon ethnic or cultural identities, family, socio-economic characteristics, or geography. Where she locates community gives us a sense of the scope and dimensions of community that may be lacking in the literature.

ROB’s communities include his family, colleagues, and the people with whom he volunteers. The central organizing theme in his community memberships is bettering the lives of other people. This is similar to what JF says about his memberships and what RC says about the activities he participates in.

ROB I think to some degree it, it, I think the common thread is that these, these different communities, um, are interested in the welfare of, of, of people. Not all of them are focused on low-income communities per se, but all of them are interrelated with the aspect of the needs of people in general.

As he considers my question about the number of communities he is a member of he says,

ROB … there’s a significant number of other sort of latent communities that I participate in that, um, that I may not have as much daily or day-to-day activity with, but, you know, periodically engage with. So to answer your question specifically, I’d say five or more different communities.

The point of asking him about the number of communities he belongs to is to show there are many communities that are a part of his life. Some of these communities are public and others private. The public communities include the university where he is employed, housing and tenant organizations, a male leadership and mentoring association, and other community-oriented organizations.

BM, like the other interviewees, acknowledges he has multiple and possibly overlapping communities. His primary communities are his family, church, and the
neighborhood that is a focus of his job. His cultural and ethnic community is African American. At the same time, he recognizes that he is part of a suburban geographical community. In the following narrative, notice how BM introduces the idea that some community memberships are ascribed as opposed to achieved by an individual.

BM Wow. What communities do I see myself belonging to? Well, hmm. That's a hard -- That's -- I mean – Well going back -- I mean, going back to the definition of community, I mean I think there's definitely certain things -- I mean, I'm part of the African American community whether I want to be or not.

I Right, right, by virtue of birth.

BM Right, right. … Exactly. So, that's, that's the given. ...

The discussion about BM's membership in a racial community is an acknowledgement that some memberships are imposed. These imposed memberships are not a function of conscious decisions or acts on the part of individuals. It also means that all of us have at least one community that we are identified with. Now, whether or not we choose to accept, embrace or act in accordance with the roles, responsibilities and expectations assigned to us as members of these communities is a different matter. Certain role assignments reflect the potential of the larger society to be coercive and restrictive. Cultural critics seem to overlook this aspect of social life in their commentaries on trends in contemporary society.

As BM thinks about his membership in the suburban community, he reflects upon the changes he anticipates in his life when his children finish high school. He says,

BM Um, I made the decision to go out and live in a suburban neighborhood, um, which, which I'm a part of and I, and that's, you know, that's a very interesting, very thought-provoking piece. Like I'm still trying to work through that completely in terms of understanding what exactly that means and what the implications are for not only myself but, but my wife and my children as well. So, I think that's -- You know, as far as physical, geographic community, I belong to that community. That was a conscious choice, that wasn't, you know, [inaudible]. But, I'll tell you something interesting, now I'm finding one of the things that I envision myself doing is that after our children finish high school, it's moving into the city.
He considers moving into the city because there is comfort in being with people who look like him, and share common values and experiences. This speaks to some of the comments participants make about community providing a sense of belonging and the familiar.

BM’s family’s situation highlights another aspect of community and participation. He lives in his suburban community to ensure that his daughters receive the best possible education and quality of life. Many African Americans move out of the city into suburban areas where they may not feel entirely comfortable. They do this because they perceive a better quality of life is available to them outside of the city. They often try to continue relationships and connections with people in their old neighborhoods but most prefer not to maintain contact with those they left behind. EH says former neighborhood residents are afraid and have anxiety about returning to the area. This makes maintaining close ties and relationships difficult, if not impossible. As a result, the former residents stay away and become increasingly disconnected from their former neighbors and even friends. If close family members, such as parents, live in the old neighborhood former residents are more likely to maintain their community ties. Although the ties may not be as strong as they once were. BM’s participation in his suburban neighborhood is determined, in part, by the boundaries, membership criteria, and opportunities for participation in that community. EH’s former neighbors will be faced with similar choices and experiences.

While BM’s church community has several meanings, he chooses to discuss the intersection of the church’s mission and target population and one of his work-related projects. His church community membership overlaps with his job. The church’s mission and target area and the neighborhood focus of his job help to support and reaffirm who he is,
particularly as he continues to find ways to fit into his suburban neighborhood. The suburban community membership does not present a bridging opportunity to his social community. However, his church membership does.

BM And that's a -- Well, now that's a whole 'nother community and I think that, you know, there's definitely -- Yes. Um, I do feel a sense of belonging to, to that community. I think they try to create a sense of community. That's a very interesting dynamic, particularly with churches. I almost feel like that's a whole different conversation. But, yes, that is definitely one of the communities that I feel a sense of belonging towards. It's, it's non-geographic in that there's people who live in all different parts of the city and suburbs who, who attend.

But the church's mission is really to serve the inner city and it's very interesting to, to be in the context where the mission is to serve the inner city. And that may actually reinforce my connectivity to the [neighborhood] because that really is the community I've been trying to serve. It's not the exact same community, the [two different neighborhoods], but really it's the, both parts of the inner city which is what the church's mission to serve is.

BM's experience seems to contradict Stanfield’s analysis about social ties and bonds between suburban blacks that are congregants of urban churches. Stanfield writes,

In many cases, when African American suburbanites retain their inner-city church memberships, their loyalty is to the institution rather than to the community surrounding the church. Churches that cater to middle-class parishioners but remain in their old ghetto locations have become increasingly disconnected from the social, political, economic fabric of the surrounding local environment (Stanfield, 1993:149).

Stanfield's assessment may be applicable to some urban churches and not others. Many of these churches have outreach ministries and programs to bring the congregation into the neighborhoods. There is also a great deal of parochialism in communities. The ministerial community can be closed and extremely biased.25 BM is the only interviewee to discuss the significance of church as a community in his life. JF, NC, EH, and PD are each connected to

25 In one community, there are two ministerial organizations. The membership of one includes younger ministers while membership in the other consists of older ministers. These two groups operate separately and are often at odds with each other. There is also a suburban mega-church with a congregation that is drawn from different areas of the city. Local ministers have tried to prevent the church from purchasing property in the neighborhood and claimed that the mega-church was taking away church members and causing their congregations to decline.
a church community and specifically reference it as a priority. CT brings up the partnership between the Nation of Islam and the black community because of the long-standing presence and impact of the Nation in the black community. He also wants to remind of the existence of other important religious organizations in the black community.

PM and PK are reflective though not necessarily self-conscious about their community memberships. PM consistently relates community identity, relationship and membership to different environments, groups, and definitions. She intuitively and consciously connects her understanding and definitions of community so they become an integral part of her memberships and membership choices.

PM  Let's see. The African American women community, I'd say first and foremost. That's a community I belong to. Um, I think I have a sense of community in terms of the women I choose to have in my life in a, you know, that I choose to give my time to, cuz I'm a wife. I'm also a mother. I'm going to be a mother again. I'm also a working, you know, professional. Um, I'm also a chef. You know, so I have all these other things to divide my time with, and I think that, you know, for me, I have a sense of community with, you know, four, five, you know, core women. That's a sense of community for me as well. And then I think all those other things I said. You know, I'm in a community of mothers. I'm a parent. You know, I'm in a community, um -- I'm a sister. Um, you know, I think that's about it.

Like other study participants, PK identifies the types of communities she is involved in, but more importantly, she tells me why she makes those choices. Her community memberships meet needs in her life.

PK  Okay. Most of the communities I belong to are African American oriented. Um, I belong to a business and professional women's group. And I joined them because I wanted to be, belong to an organization of women who, um, who were doing community service work at different levels, and also it was sort of a networking and a social kind of program, you know, environment for me. You know, you get to meet new people. You know, so most of the communities that I belong to, that I involve myself with, are more African American, um, and they're, most of them are, um, there is either an education, education related or community service related.
The community service and education interests in her life are based upon personal preferences and are primarily exercised in the public sphere of her life. Her social community is in the private sphere.

PK     Um, the -- And then there's my social network. Um, you know, that I -- I would probably say that other than work, my social network is, is really no white people in it. Um, and I don't know, cuz some of my friends, they have, they do have white folk that they hang out with that they socialize, they have in their network. But, I've just maintained or I've never really found anyone that, outside of my race that I want to, that I have had a relationship with of any long term. Most of my relationships have been either in school or work-related and once I left, that was it. But my black friends, my black relationships, have maintained over the years, so, and even new ones, so that's, that's the community that I associate with that I feel more comfortable with. I feel, you know, because we have so much in common, and, yes, we talk about, you know, what the white folk isn't doing, what they're doing or, you know, what's going on. I think we have, you know, there's a lot of commonality. We're not all educated the same way. But we all have a respect for one another. I mean, you know, so I think that -- You know, that's the community I feel more comfortable being in, and, yeah, everywhere I've gone, living in another state, the majority, the communities that I lived with or that I moved around in, the circles that I was with, were all African American.

One of the observations all of the interviewees make is that community has a purpose or function in a person’s life. If the need changes or is not met, the person makes a decision about continuing to participate.

Living in an ethnically and economically transforming neighborhood, PK says she is trying to make connections with neighborhood residents. She is a homeowner and already knows her immediate neighbors. It is the connection to the broader community she is trying to make. Her usual approach to participation cannot be used in her current neighborhood so she adapts to the situation and interacts with people who have shared interests. This is important to our general discussion about community memberships and participation because PK’s situation lets us see that people will make adjustments in response to the specific environment or community opportunities available to them. This happens whether or not the opportunities are in line with their preferences or operational definitions of community and
membership. However, we have to wonder whether or not people have the same ontological ease under these circumstances as they would if they were able to select memberships based upon their preferences.36

In PK’s case, participation in the community is situationally-defined. That is, she is constrained by demographic, race, class, and cultural differences in her immediate area and then neighborhood. However, this is not a unique experience. In general, this is a part of everyday life. This impacts the level and type of community choices a person believes or knows they have. As a result, the extent to which a person becomes involved may depend less on their personal preferences and more upon how much they desire to become engaged in the process and the barriers to participation. PK wants to become involved in her neighborhood and that desire overrides the preferred and accustomed pattern of developing associational relationships with people who look like her, have shared histories, values, and perspectives.

PK ... I guess it's just trying to participate, you know, or get a feel, especially in [the neighborhood], you know, how I could fit in in this community, or what can I do. Um, and, you know, just haven't felt that connection yet. I haven't felt that connection, so I connect myself with other groups that are doing things in the community. You know, most of it has been cultural or other organizations. There is one organization I support, and, you know, it's an educat -- They're educators. So I support them in, you know, either attending their fund raising events or, you know, whatever, some of their seminars. ... I would say that for me, community, I guess it is more of a personal -- You know, I see it as more of a personal -- It's how it's going to do for me. You know, on a personal level, and if there's some way that I could be, I could participate, then I will. Um, and I try to look at if it's the benefit of all people, but I know that the reason I'm participating is because it's for a specific group.

PK’s situation shows us what can happen when a person with a strong commitment to civic participation is in an unfamiliar, possibly uncomfortable situation. In the past, she was able to find opportunities with few barriers to entry and easily identifiable sets of criteria for

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Footnote 36: I found myself in a similar situation that was compounded by the fact that community boundaries were based upon whether or not a person was a ‘native son or daughter’ and race. There was no connection to an...
membership. When she realizes that her normal ways of community engagement and connecting with others is not possible she finds herself trying to identify common ground and points of mutual interest and concern with other community members. As she finds them, her participation in the life of her new community will increase. Adaptive, and clearly reflective, choices about community memberships are being made.

VJ’s situation is somewhat different from PK’s. The communities she participates in are directly related to her identity; however, they are not limited by race or gender.

VJ I definitely feel I belong to a community of African American women. I definitely feel that I belong to the community of African Americans who live in [the City]. I definitely feel as if I am connected maybe generationally through the West Indian community or West Indian American community.

I And why do you feel those community connections?

VJ I feel those community connections because I feel they are what most strongly make me who I am, a woman of African and Caribbean descent, living in [the city].

VJ uses the word connections as she talks about her communities and just as African American women, for example, represent a common thread for PK, the common thread for VJ is spirituality and the fact that each community reflects a part of who she is. The spiritual grounding of her communities helps her to feel safe and reduces any fears she has. It is a reflection of something fundamental and basic to her character and nature.

VJ I think primarily because of the spiritual grounding that the communities I belong to share. I think that, you know, we live in a society in which the focus is too often on the material and too often on the obvious, the seen. And, particularly people of African descent, women, have a, have another understanding of the way things tend to work out in this world. Even if things look as if they’re absent, they may not in fact be absent or, you know just our way of coping. You know, that sorta finding a way out of no way. You know. Making things happen when things look virtually impossible. That’s sort of our legacy in this country. You
know, I mean, we look at all the odds that are constantly stacked against us yet at the same time, we, with all the barriers, with all the ‘isms’ that are stacked up against us; the tide coming, you know, against us, forcing us back, we still produce. Generations of people who continue to succeed and thrive. And we know we definitely have our problems but we still produce people who will make it through somehow.

As she describes these community relationships, it is clear that they are connected to the legacy of racism and slavery in this country. The relationships reflect the ability to overcome obstacles, inequities, and inequality of opportunity and access.

**Community has a responsibility**

Membership responsibility explains why the interviewees feel it is important to participate in the life of a community. One interview question asks the interviewees to think about the role that the community has to play and whether or not it has a responsibility to its members. From the responses, there is no doubt that community members have an expectation of reciprocity. Community responsibility is interpreted in physical and psychological terms. There are expectations for basic municipal services, means of production and commerce, educational institutions, housing, health and safety, political and governmental institutions, cultural institutions, religious and social institutions. The social-psychological obligations include providing continuity and frame of reference, giving a person a sense of safety, supporting and strengthening a member, and providing a sense of direction and guidance.

The expectation is that community will recognize, support, and nurture the growth and development of members. At the same time, it is cultivating the strengths and leadership abilities of its members. By doing so, it is helping to stabilize the social, cultural, economic, and educational infrastructure necessary to sustain itself.
JF: Well, the community's responsibility -- and I guess metaphors are probably the best way sometimes to explain things -- um, and I'll use the family unit because, as I stated earlier, to me, that's the nucleus, that's where everything begins -- and we know that -- they say you can pick a lot of things, but you can't pick your family.

I: That's true.

JF: Okay. And so therefore, you have your family, and what you find, once you know that you have a responsibility for your family unit, you are able to make allowances for the positives and the negatives that each of us possess. And I say -- And so using that analogy, using that metaphor, the community has the same thing. There's no perfection in any of us who participate in community, and so you have to recognize a person's strengths and their weaknesses. And it seems to me that what the community wants to do is to be able to encourage the strengths of somebody to come out, to be recognized, in order to flourish, so that the community can benefit. So, if I was there -- It would depend upon where you are. If I was the one organizing within the community, what I'm going to try to do is to bring together a complement of people to achieve a certain objective.

And what I'm going to be looking for is to try to find the strengths which that person in the community can bring to the issue, and so, therefore, as a leader, it would be responsible for me to try to meld all these different views, attitudes, et cetera, into a common good for the community. So, so I think what the community's role is, to help to identify, to encourage for each member of the community to put forward the most positive aspect of what they can contribute to the community.

The asset-based analytical model developed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) is applicable to a cultural or civil society analysis because it is premised upon looking at the strengths, opportunities, and potential of the institutions and individuals in a community. This is the way JF says community should approach and interact with its members. JE has a similar perspective. In order for the member to participate and support the community, the community must nurture and cultivate the skills, aspirations, values, and goals of that member. The community must also recognize that the member's participation or contributions are based on real and perceived opportunities.

JE and PM specifically refer to the relationship as a two-way street. VJ and TJ discuss the relationship between community and a member as one of reciprocity. The member and community each have a responsibility to the other. JE says,
JEWell, it's pretty, it's pretty much the same. It's, it's a two-way street. The community's responsibility is to give that member room of freedom and openness and freedom of thought and to pass energy back and forth. It isn't to make it do one thing or the other. So, if, you know, there's always standards. Like everyone would like to see everyone in their community, for example, cut their grass at the same time. If you want their grass cut, can you actually volunteer to cut the elderly person's grass who can't get out to cut it generally? The community's obligation's backwards to the individual who has a responsibility of helping, ah, humanity. The community's collective has to pass that backwards, but that's only passed through individuals, not as an organization. But if you create an organization to actually do those things, that will be that organization's mission to do that more than it is their obligation because the organization created a mission to do certain tasks. I'm not sure if it's obligated. I know from my interactions, um, throughout the community, throughout a bunch of communities, that I hear a lot that people say that organizations are obligated to help in the community and I'm not sure what that means.

PM says the community and its members each have to engage in acts of give and take.

In her response, she focuses on interpersonal relationships and dynamics between members.

PM It goes both ways. I mean, sometimes you're a community of two. You know? But it goes both ways. Um, because I don't think that anybody can keep putting out and then it's like, geez, you're not giving me anything back. You know, I need something too. You know, and there may be times when all you, your only responsibility to the community is to give because it's your time to give. But then when it's your time to receive, you also have to know your community. The community is there for you to get whatever it is that you need. You know, and it may never balance out. Um, but, and I don't think that being a part of a community is necessarily a balancing act, but I think that as long as you have the openness, the honesty, the sharing, you know, and the common goal, whatever that goal is, and it just may just be to nurture each other, then I think that, you know, it can work, and I think that -- Yeah, I mean, I feel pretty strong about that.

She is really talking about a social community, not a physical community. In a sense, PM offers us the beginnings of a generalized discussion of community and member reciprocity applicable to internal and, or external interactions operating across multiple communities.

Similar to the idea of a two-way street, VJ and TJ talk about reciprocity. She says,

VJ Yeah. I think it's reciprocal. I think this kind of thing goes back and forth. As much as I'm in classroom or, or, or in some kind of a [inaudible] capacity, in any of the programs I work in, I learn back. Okay. I learned that people were having reliance on the check-cashers and liquor stores to get their checks cashed. Okay. I learned some things, and I realized that this is the reason why, um, you know, getting an apartment or getting a car was so difficult for people. It didn't need to be. Okay. And that's just one example of many, many examples of ways in which each side can inform the other. In every way, people in class shared within the class. People on the outside share with folks inside. People in families sent infor -- I mean, it's just a cross-communication kind of thing. Um, and that's sort of how we structured
TJ states that the community should be responsive to the member’s needs.

TJ I think the community has to, you know, I think that the community has to give back to the individual all the things that they expect the individual to give back to them. Oh, but they're expensive. Okay. So the community's responsibility to the member is that the community should meet the needs of the member and do what? Give back to the member the same things that they expect the member to give to the community. If they expect a member to make contributions to the community, the community should be doing the same thing. They should be fulfilling a need of not just that member, but all the members of the community. And I'm not just saying just a need, but needs, needs of the entire community.

He also feels that the community should not take a top-down approach in policy-making and service delivery. There should be a partnership with the members.

TJ Make themselves available, outreach to, to the rest of the community. Not just to one individual or a few individuals but make their programs known. That their activities be available to all segments of the community and, ah, have the kind of resource that draw more people to the community. Because that's the only thing that's gonna make a community grow. If the community doesn't have resources, it's not gonna attract people. If people aren't attracted to the community, it isn't gonna grow and it kind of becomes stagnant. I mean, you know, the, the ideas of the community shouldn't be coming from -- the community shouldn't be telling individuals what it needs. The individuals should be telling the community what it needs, whether that sounds strange or not.

Like TJ, ROB says that a community must meet the needs of its members.

ROB Uh, to continue to serve its needs. The, the community, I think it no longer, it's no longer a community if it's not serving the needs of its members. You know, I mean, that's looking at it in, in organizational terms, but, you know, it's happened in, in many instances where you have boards that begin to lose sight of what its members want or what these members need. They begin to do stuff, you know, sometimes against their wishes or against their interests for whatever reasons and then I think it begins to break down and, you know, that whole trust aspect that I talked about and people's comfort in what they feel their community or organization can do begins to, begins to deteriorate.

A willingness to accept the member is what BM expects from the community. The acceptance is tempered somewhat by the member’s actions. As long as the member does nothing destructive or harmful to the community, BM feels the person should be accepted. In
the end, it comes down to trust, but a trust that is conferred and then denied if a member
breaks that trust.

BM says,

BM The community's responsibility to the member, I think is acceptance and I can't say
unconditional acceptance, but acceptance on the basis that, um, you know, we accept you for
who you are as an individual, personally and, and a lot, you know, you get into a lot of different
things there because you can really, you know -- Say, for instance, a homosexual moves into
your community. You know, do you accept them? Because your value system may not
necessarily line up with their lifestyle. You know, um, I think -- And I think in those instances
the greatest thing that you can do is say, "Okay. That doesn't -- Your lifestyle doesn't line up
with my value system but --" I think that's where tolerance may come into play. I'll tolerate
that and not mistreat you based on that particular aspect of who you are. Now, if it's
something -- If it's -- If a drug dealer moves into the neighborhood, that's a whole different --

There should be a recognition that members are different from each other and no effort
should be made to force a member to conform to the rule of the majority. Membership does
not mean there is uniformity among members. JE reminds us that each member is unique,
with skills and a development process specific to that experience.

NC uses an historical perspective of community to explain his views on the
community's responsibility to a member. He, like JF, LS, EH, AH, KW and VB, says that
when he was growing up the people in the community helped each other and could be
counted on for support. NC remembers the experience of community growing up and the
ways in which family members and neighbors were actively engaged in helping the young
people.

NC I think the community's obligation to its, its member, uh, is to, um, um, it gives back,
in, and that's a difficult one in a sense, but as a community grows and is, is, it is and is positive,
uh, this phrase that you hear, uh, it takes a village to raise somebody. And I think back in the
old days when I was growing up, you know, uh, uh, if my father wouldn't keep me straight, my
uncles and, and, and the neighbors, if they were adult and they were friends of my parents and
stuff like that; so it takes a village. It takes a community to raise children and stuff like that,
and I think it's reflective if you've got a good community and ladies can go out and sit in the
park and children have got plenty to do and all that kind of stuff. So I think that's what
communities give back if they're, if they're real good communities. If they don't squabble over
petty things, you know, that's how I think a community gives back.
For him, it is about giving back and by giving back you will have a good community.

The community has the obligation to ensure that people are safe and the member has the obligation not to engage in behaviors that would make others feel unsafe or fearful. LMB and EH share a similar attitude about the quality of life of a community being based, in part, on security. LMB believes that a lack of safety or sense of security is one of the things that limits member participation and causes a community to change. In the following excerpt, LMB associates a safe community with city services, the quality of education, community services, and a nice place to live. She says,

LMB Uh, I guess foremost is to keep it as safe as possible. If, you know, seeing something going on, trying to make sure that whatever's going on is good, and that nobody gets hurt, or nobody's in danger, foremost me and my kids and family and friends, and so on and so forth. Neighbors, neighbors' kids. Things like that. Um, to provide someplace safe, um, nice, uh, which encompasses services. You know, city services, and such. Um, that's it, just about those things. Safe, relatively nice place to live, or nice place to live you know, the quality of education, community services.

EH also feels that safety is important and like LMB she goes on to discuss other aspects of the community's responsibility to its members. She specifically identifies places for youth, seniors, and places to shop on her list of what a community should provide for its members.

EH Yeah, I think it has a, you know, try to make sure that the community's safe, make sure that we have, um, just whatever it needs. Whatever the community need, if, um -- You know, I think they should have a responsibility to make sure that there are safe places for the children to go. I mean, something for the children to do besides just hanging out. Um, a youth center or something. I believe that every community should at least have one youth center for the children to go. I mean, something for them to do, a place for the elderly to go, something for them to do. Um, someplace for them to go and make sure they buy food or whatever, a grocery store or something, you know.
Community is ultimately a partnership between members and itself. Each of the parties has a role and a set of responsibilities determining the nature, quality and complexity of the relationship.

Communities can help citizens build resources. For example, communities can attract businesses that pay good wages, and communities can provide social capital through organizations that are inclusive of diverse people. … The job of building resources is the responsibility of everyone: the individual, the family, the employer, and the community (DeVol, 2004:15).

Community and its members have a responsibility to support, nurture, and assist in the development of the other. All of this occurs within the context of multiple communities and boundaries.

The interviewees expect a certain amount of accountability from the community. Whether it is to meet the needs of members, address quality-of-life issues and concerns, share information or create appropriate opportunities for participation by different groups, the community is to be accountable for losses and gains in terms of social capital through civic engagement. KW says it best. “Community is reciprocal you know. What you give out, you get back, equal measure, equal measure. You know, it works in relationships; it works in, it’s a natural law you know. It’s a natural law.” This is a fundamental rule of community. Just as we have rules or principles in the sciences, there are rules governing community. They are not legalistic, but may in their application be putative and coercive.

The issue of obligation and responsibility aside, what we see from these narratives is that people have expectations about how they and others ought to behave in a community. Underlying the discussions about the decline of civil society are our own expectations of responsibility and obligation.
Community memberships are dynamic. Bonds and connections to different communities change and individuals adapt to those changes. Despite the concerns expressed by social commentators about the atomistic and anomic pressures exerted by technology in society, we see that every day people recognize and frequently celebrate the multiple communities and relationships in their lives.

Each study participant has made a personal commitment, in whatever way possible, to benefit their community and society. Their communities correspond to the roles or identities they have in their lives.

The next chapter, (De)Constructing Community explores the persistence of community. The interviewees share the belief that community is changing and that these changes are not necessarily a positive aspect of contemporary society. Yet they remain optimistic about the future.
CHAPTER FIVE
(De)Constructing Community

Even if the institutions around the community failed or were failing, the community would survive – because at its core are the people. AP, female

In *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Anthony P. Cohen (1985) suggests that community is not constituted or constructed by the institutional forms but is created by community members. Three of the interviewees explicitly state that they believe community members create the institutions. “Society, Durkheim took care to write, exists and lives only in and through individuals” (Nisbet, 1996:95). The other interviewees acknowledge that without the support of members, some institutions will decline. If there is a situation in which these institutions are failing or not responding to their needs, it is within the power of the members to make changes to the existing institutions or create new ones.

According to Cohen, community is essentially a symbol whose meanings are interpreted by the individualistic experiences of the people who share in the common acceptance, though not necessarily hold a common meaning, of this symbol. The use of the structural or structural-functionalist theory to analyze and comprehend the psychological and experiential perceptions of community is not appropriate. An interpretivist theoretical model is a more logical analytical tool. The symbols or metaphors used by community members are much better measures of the complexity of social interactions in a post-industrial and technology reliant society.

People use symbols to create meaning in their lives. Symbols are important because individuals use them as signs and guideposts to make choices. As a symbol, community definitions and meanings are created by a society, group, individuals or one individual based
upon the identification or demarcation of a boundary. Sometimes the boundary is visible such as a geographical location with physical characteristics; at other times, the community boundary is less obvious because of its connection to social-psychological attitudes and adaptations to contemporary life.

The interviewees use symbols to explain their sense of community. Family is the primary symbol of community in the lives of twenty (20) of the interviewees. AP uses the white picket fence to symbolize the cohesiveness and the insular nature of the neighborhood she grew up in. PM uses the abstract painting as one of her symbols of community. She says that like the abstract painting, community consists of many seemingly disparate parts. However, when viewing the composition as a whole, the observer is able to see that aspects of the canvas complement one another. There may not be a balance or synergy, but the pieces on the canvas fit. This can also be said about the different pieces and parts of a community.

Identifying and understanding the symbols and metaphors used by community members allows us to reconsider the crisis in community argument found in the decline of civil society analysis. There may not be a crisis. At least not in the way the social commentaries would have us believe. What may be occurring in contemporary society is the reinterpretation of the meanings or the replacement of the traditional symbols (institutions and types of activities) associated with civic engagement. Interpretation is subjective and relative. Therefore,

Different people oriented to the same phenomenon are likely to differ from each other in certain respects in their interpretations of it...These interpretations are not random. They tend to be made within the terms characteristic of a given society, and influenced by its language, ecology, its traditions of belief and ideology...They are...responsive to the circumstances of interaction, both among individuals, and between the society as a whole and those across its boundaries (Cohen, 1985:17).
This research project demonstrates that there are people in our society who possess a strong sense of community and community spirit. These individuals are willing to acknowledge, and maybe even to confront, the experience of changing relationships and bonds of kinship in their communities and in their own lives. The interviewees may lament the changes they see in our society but they are not discouraged and choose to continue trying to make a difference wherever they can.

The discourse and research on the crisis in community raise an interesting set of questions regarding the underlying assumptions being made about what community is, how it is sustained or undermined, and how it changes. It is important to have an understanding of what these crises mean to the individuals who are conducting research, developing policy policies, administering and developing programs, and organizing in communities. This study helps to identify what community means to the interviewees and whether or not they believe there is a crisis in community.

Persistence of Community

Over time, the interviewees have noticed that the more traditional communal relationships they experienced growing up have changed. Bonds between former neighbors are found to be tenuous and unable to withstand one or the other moving from the community. The neighborly closeness reflected in watching out for each other’s children and property are present but in a far less public and systemic way.
Many of interviewees feel there is a crisis of community spirit and attitude and a crisis in community institutions. However, each one of the interviewees remains confident and optimistic about community in our society. What are the characteristics of community that might help to explain its persistence? One is that community is a process and develops through socialization. There are also generational traditions that people continue on an ongoing basis or choose to create with their families.

**Community is a process**

Community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediately than the abstraction we call ‘society’. It is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home. In it they learn the meaning of kinship through being able to perceive its boundaries – that is, by juxtaposing it to non-kinship, they learn ‘friendship; they acquire the sentiments of close association and the capacity to express or otherwise manage these in their social relationships. Community, therefore, is where one learns and continues how to ‘be social.’ At the risk of substituting an indefinable category for another, we could say it is where one acquires ‘culture’ (Cohen, 1985:15).

An individual’s community attitudes and behaviors are the result of socialization. The process of socialization occurs within the private and public spheres of a person’s life. Family members model behavior based upon observations. Young people look to their peers for direction and affirmation of appropriate and acceptable behaviors. Adults find themselves in a number of different circumstances in which the community as an organizational culture has to be learned.

The interviewees believe that people learn about community from a number of sources within society – individuals, institutions, families, and friends. “The individual acquires a review of him/herself as an objective and meaningful social entity by taking the role of

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28 For this research project crisis in community has been redefined to reflect the personal and institutional realms of community. As a result, the interviewees responded to questions about a crisis in community. Footnote continued on the next page.
specific and then of generalized others” (Thoits, 1983:175). When PD was a child, her aunt volunteered her for different activities. It was through this relationship she learned the importance of participating in the community – community as service. She believes community is learned through tradition. A tradition she chooses to carry on with her two daughters, niece, and grandson.

Several of the interviewees say that people learn about community by observing the world around them. An individual takes his or her cues from the environment much in the way a child learns to develop within a family. Interactions with different family members provide the cues to help an infant learn; members of a community perform this function as well. Members learn their respective roles and responsibilities from the community itself. If we are seeing a decline in community, then it is possible the traditional paths by which individuals learn about community no longer function as they once did. LS believes this is the case. TJ touches upon this same issue when he discusses aspects of his job and the changes he sees in his community.

LS feels the primary socializing institution, the family, is not able to prepare children to participate in their communities. An observation she makes is that many parents of children are young themselves and were never taught about community by their parents. This is a very different experience from that of the study participants. Their childhood community members participated in raising the neighborhood children. In most neighborhoods today we do not see this happening to the extent it occurred in the past.

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institutions and a crisis of community spirit and attitudes.
One of the reasons for the change is that neighbors are afraid of retaliation by the parents and, or the children.

Our understanding of community is that if one source of socialization is not able to carry out its function, then another source from the society is supposed to step in. This raises the question, “If community is or can be learned through other institutions or interactions with others, then what is occurring within our society to make people believe that it is not happening as it used to?” Maybe it is because the actions of some individuals are in opposition to the needs and expectations of the larger community. Gangs are a perfect example of community among individuals but the actions are destructive to the larger community and ultimately to the members themselves. Perhaps the transformation of communities is such that there are few places to learn about community membership and responsibility. Or, the ways in which community has been viewed are no longer applicable and society needs to find other ways to identify, understand, and respond to these changing relationships and sets of interactions.

AH has an historical experience of community unlike the other interviewees because of growing up on a segregated sea island.29 He describes his community’s tradition of passing down its history from one generation to the next. This is what Bellah et al. (1986) refers to as a community of memory. Places where the members learn about the history, values, and traditions of their communities. He writes,

People growing up in communities of memory not only hear the stories that tell how the community came to be, what its hopes and fears are, and how its ideals are exemplified in outstanding men and women; they also participate in the practices—ritual, aesthetic, ethical—that define the community as a way of life. We call these “practices of commitment” for they

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29 AP talks about growing up on a peninsula and describes a community that is segregated, self-sufficient and thriving. She comments during the interview that in her community they had everything they needed.
define the patterns of loyalty and obligation that keep the community alive. And if the language of the self-reliant individual is the first language of American moral life, the languages of tradition and commitment in communities of memory are “second languages” that most Americans know as well, and which they use when the language of the radically separate self does not seem adequate (Bellah, 1986:154).

AH’s story describes multiple levels of socialization in his community of memory. When he was growing up, learning about community was part of the rite of passage for youths entering puberty. Until puberty, the whole community is involved in helping the young person develop. Upon reaching puberty, the young person seeks out a mentor or instructor to assist him or her in progressing into adulthood. This guide works with the young person to get them through the process. The tradition he describes sheds light on the ways in which the sea island community exercised control over the young person. There were serious consequences for anyone who did not accept the meaning of community and the role expectations associated with membership and adulthood.

AH I remember some of the traditions when I was coming up. For example, to become a member of the society, a functioning member, one of the things that we did on the sea islands was when you got 12 you had to go and seek and find your own identity. And in order for you to do that you would have to find you a master and that master would work with you until he said that you had completed your journey. [This had to happen] before you could get welcomed into that society. And then you could get baptized and join the church.

You could not put your hand on the table and talk about “I believe.” Oh, no. They would take you -- Oh, no, no, no. You got to go and find, find yourself. You know, and this would be a ritual that you knew you had to go through and those who didn't go through it, everybody would look at you like, "This person, oh, he wouldn't be worth [anything]." I'm telling you, and everybody knew it. You know, boys and girls. But not only that. And they did it at 12 because that's when you were in the midst of puberty. Exactly, you see. So, then you had to really -- And what you actually said when you were 12 -- When you went to the secret [inaudible] that you can only learn once you've gone through the process -- then you will actually say into your prayer that you don't want them to be responsible for your actions anymore. You take full responsibility for your actions, you see. So, now you become a functioning part of society and you know what is required of you now.

AH’s description of the rite of passage in his community is a concrete example of the way in which socialization can be used to create fully functioning members of a society.
What is required is a collective will and commitment to the process. In AH’s community, it was part of the overall society’s cultural norms and traditions.

AH speaks poignantly and earnestly about losing traditions and the need for African Americans to reflect on the importance of these traditions in helping young people learn about themselves, their place and importance in the larger community. As he continues talking about his community’s rite of passage he says,

AH You see. So, we have to be -- You know, we have to be very careful of how we, we, we lose certain sacred aspects of our life. We have to keep the sacred pieces in. We have to go back and research it again and again and again and we have to make it positive; we have to put the proper spin on it because if you show little black boys and girls these pictures of Africans being hung from a tree, who in hell want to be that?

In the past, the community on the sea island was very involved in the lives of the young people. AH says that things have changed ‘at home30.’ The traditions are no longer observed and he sees a difference in the attitude of the young people there. He is concerned about the future.

AH So, from sea island to city, we have, we have really self-destructed. And it's not going to get any better until we revisit where we are and then we can again develop the whole idea of community of what it needs to be because then we have to look, focus, on what it was. I mean, we had to have had a real sense of community because we look around, there's no group of people under the sun who have been through what we have been through but, we got South Carolina State, we got Winston-Salem State, we got Morgan State and we got Fisk, we got Tuskegee, we got Lane, we got all these institutions. Now who do you know under the sun that has been under what we have been through and have got universities?

Loss of community traditions, not just community institutions, can lead to the decline, if not the demise, of a community.

In the contemporary African American experience, the annual Family Reunions are the best approximations to the communities of memory Bellah is referring to. They are not actual

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30 ‘At home’ has significance for AH because no matter where else he lives home is going to be his community on the sea island.
communities in the sense of being physically or geographically identifiable. However, the role of these family gatherings play is similar. For example, family members wear tee-shirts depicting the genealogy of the family. Often the organizers of the events prepare a book detailing the family’s roots and lineages on the family tree. The remaining elders tell the story and history of the family and different family members. Through these storytellers family members find out about the successes and failures of distant relations. The value to a family is incalculable when the members find out that they are related to a famous actor or actress, politician, scientist, or entrepreneur. Aunts, uncles, cousins and their families meet for the first time or reconnect and get to share their sense of history about the family. Each of the attendees receives mementos of the event. The purpose is not just to celebrate the families or commemorate the event it is also to enlist the help of the family members in transmitting the collective memory of the family.

The idea that responsible community membership is a function of tradition or history is an interesting one. For example, PD talks about family traditions and passing them on. AH describes the experience of living in a fairly closed society on a sea island. Nearly everyone talks about the experience of growing up in a place where everyone in the neighborhood knew each child and had a relationship with the parents. It was understood that even if the parents were not physically present children had to behave. Otherwise, any adult who saw them act out would chastise them and then tell their parents.31 In PD’s family, the socialization process passes on the values and expressions of community, civic participation and responsibility. In

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31 Today, many adults are afraid to say anything to a young person because they fear retaliation and violence from both the young person or his or her family member.
AH's sea island community, it is a process for entering adulthood and becoming a functioning member of the society.

Some people believe that community is learned as in a process whether through socialization or tradition. JF and JE maintain the position that a member learns about community by observing the world around them. JE says that we learn from the institutions around us. JF believes that because we are born into communities we learn from them.

JF Well, again, people are aware communities exist because we're born into them. Now, sometimes people can, can see and not see. People can hear, but they're not listening. Um, that is the distinction that oftentimes will take place. Many times, people have to be guided. And that guidance comes from someone else. Um, it could be, you know, family. Um, it could be by mentoring. Um, it could be by, um, by way of an interest in a particular subject matter. So, it could be a number of different ways. So, sometimes, you know, one will become involved in it.

Because it's not a matter of learning about it, because my sense is they learn about it by, simply by being -- But my thing is, sometimes they have to be guided to become involved. And the problem is that there are many persons who exist in it, but they aren't involved in it. They just go about doing and for, attending to their own personal needs, almost oblivious to the fact that, that they're being affected and influenced by a number of different things. And if they were to become involved, they could take some leadership in it. So, sometimes it's circumstances that will get one to do it. Oftentimes it's a matter of someone will mentor and guide one to it. So, it varies.

From JF's and JE’s perspective, community is learned and an aspect of that learned behavior is an inner- and outer-directed sense of responsibility. The person incorporates a set of values which is then used to establish a moral compass and point of reference for community participation and responsibility.

JE Um, as it's defined by the person that's asking the question. That's how they learn. They learn from, from, um, from the institutions that define community.

Members learn some of their roles and responsibilities from the community itself. An individual takes cues and lessons in community from the environment much in the way a child learns to develop within a family. The primary ‘teacher’ is the family; a secondary teacher is the larger community and its members. For example, DB after reflecting upon his decision to
return to his old neighborhood after more than twenty years, remarks about seeing males in his community who worked as Executive Directors of organizations. He says that these men were role models for some of the young males in the neighborhood. Knowing that the men held prominent positions impressed the young men. They thought it was possible for them to obtain similar positions. In fact, when DB thinks about his professional accomplishments he remembers that experience and contributes some of his ambition to the men from the neighborhood.

When her children were young, EH moved her family from a southern to a northern community where she was treated as an outsider when the family moved into the new neighborhood. She thought she would have the same sense of family in their new home. EH never felt a deep-seated sense of family and belonging in the new community. She says that having young children required her to interact with other parents and neighbors in the area. EH also was more involved in community activities because of her children. The closeness and security that were an integral part of her life in the South, was absent in her adopted community.

EH Well, I think so, because coming from the south, it's like everybody is your family. It's like all the parents are your parents. So, if you did something wrong, okay, they think you did something wrong, you didn't have to wait until, you know, your parents came home, because they automatically, if they saw you doing something wrong, they would automatically just say something to you and make you stop; you know, or whatever they had to do. And back then, there was no such thing as talking back to, you know adult figures. Because back then, you was a child, and they was an adult, and that's the way it was. If they wanted you to do something, or you saw something that needed to be done, you know, you did it. You know, whether, if, if, maybe you're feeding the animals and you know somebody didn't feel good. You know, maybe your neighbor couldn't do it, it wasn't the thing about you had to wait for the neighbor to say, um, can you do this? Or, I'll pay you. There was no such thing as being paid, you just, you did it, you know? And I think that's why I feel, feel like that was, you felt

32 In the past, there was a perception among northern blacks that southern blacks were not sophisticated. In addition, there was a reluctance to accept individuals whose roots were not in the neighborhood. There is no way to know whether or not any of this played a part in how EH was received.
part of the neighborhood because you knew you was the neighborhood because it didn't have
to be the person next door it could be the person five houses down. I mean, to me, that was
family; I mean, the community, because that's, I guess that's why I felt like it was family;
because you could do these things, and everybody helped out everybody.

Six of the interviewees specifically speak about this experience of being recognized and
'parented' by members of the community.

TJ, LMB, and ROB discuss their personal experiences of learning about community
within their families. TJ's grandparents were the ones who taught him about community and
the contribution he could make to it. Like the generation before him, he has passed those
values on to his sons and hopes that they will do the same. LMB and ROB identify the family
as the very first place that a person learns about community. The lessons continue within the
family and outside through organizations, such as the Boys and Girls clubs, churches, schools,
Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts.

LMB Basically, a sense of right and wrong, and um, good and bad, uh. You know, you
know that um, racism usually starts at home, and that kind of thing. All your social values and
stuff start from the nucleus of the family. They can learn about it in school, if the schools add
that into their curriculum, and they can learn about it at wherever they go, like if they go to
church, or if they go to the Y, they may teach them like that there, if they're in, you know,
certain groups. They're taught, you know, or girl scouts, or boy scouts, you're taught that, you
know, you have to do something other than think of yourself. But basically, stuff starts within
the family, and whatever institutions are close, and usually that's church, and school. But the
trouble schools have educating, can't really expect them to do so much about (inaudible) a
sense of community. But I, I, I think a lot of schools do try to instill some sense with uh, with
the limited resources they have.

LMB is raising two college-aged daughters and strives to instill in them a sense of
community commitment and responsibility. She hopes they have developed a pride in their
surroundings and a desire to give back to the community in whatever way they can. However,
there is no way of knowing whether or not she has been successful. She says she just has to
wait and see how her daughters choose to live their lives.
ROB’s family has a tradition of community service and he learned about responsibility and commitment to the community from his siblings and his father.

ROB Uh, I learned about it very early because I have four brothers and I think when you come from a large family or a fairly large family, you learn really early on the value of relationships, interpersonal relationships, and, um. I learned at a very early age that, you know, engaging with people, getting along with people, or relating to people and how you relate to people is an important aspect of life. I mean the motto of treat people the way you want to be treated, uh, I think if people held more to it, we’d have a much better society. But I think the underlying tone or message in that statement is that, you know, your interpersonal relationships are important and how you handle those interpersonal relationships contribute to the health and well-being of the community you participate in. ... I, I learned from my dad that, uh, it’s important to not only stay engaged with the community that you live in or the neighborhood that you live in, but it’s also important to stay engaged with the community that you exist in and, that’s for everybody in society. And so you stay engaged with what’s going on, uh, some form or some aspect and, and try to make some positive contribution to that for the betterment of society in general.

ROB remarks he has observed that as people develop, their own personal concerns affect whether or not they will participate in a community. In essence, the ego or self takes over. The driving force or motivation sometimes is selfishness, when there was a time it was selflessness.

ROB I think we begin to com--, I don’t want to say communitize, that’s not a word, but we’ve become communal at a very early age and I think somewhere along the line we begin to, to, to mess with or taint the community principles so to speak. Where people pick or choose and become less involved or only become involved because of personal interests and sometimes not necessarily for the interests for the greater good.

The concern about self-interest is something that AH and RG address. During their interviews, they each express a concern similar to what the communitarians have discussed as a growing problem with individualism and self-interest. The interviewees feel that increasing self-interest is one of the reasons a community changes.

RG expresses her concern that African Americans have become too ‘I-centered.’ She feels they no longer subscribe to the We-ness that was so important to their survival. RG uses
an example from popular culture to describe what she means. The example she uses is the
Borg from one of the Star Trek series.

RG 33 Which um, has had I think a profound impact on black people. I think that is some
uh the psychic damage bein’ done to black people. It's almost -- I don't know if you watch Star
Trek, but they had this Star Trek series, where they had um, these uh, like clones, but they were
a community. And they all worked together. And they couldn't have one -- there was no one.
They had no -- they were only we. And I think that there is a correlation to us and them, in
that we were a very strong WE. And this I imposition, the I, the my that's around us has
really impacted the culture and who we are in a very spiritual way. It's damaged us. It's
damaged us spiritually and psychically.

AH expresses a similar concern about the impact of a self-centered culture on the traditions
and ethos of the African American community.

Community is all LS says she has ever known in her life and it began with her family.
She says that no other institutions provided her with an understanding and appreciation for
community. She says,

LS This is all I've ever seen. Just to look after each other. This is what we were taught.
If you know a person in need, help them. If you've got two cents, give them one. This is all
I've ever seen. Because when we were little, this is what people would do. I remember when
the hog killing time, uh, people used to go help each other. Boys go over, you're gonna lay a
hog, everybody go over there. If somebody decided they would be, it was never a big problem.
You know, no lack of help.

LS is concerned about the alarming trend of so many young people not having the
kind of foundation that helps them grow into positive community members. She believes that
if she were growing up in today’s society she would not have the same sense of community as
she has now. LS feels strongly about this because, “Whatever goes on in the household, rubs
off on you. This is all you see. This is all you know. This is all you do.” The reality is that
only so much can be done outside of the family and without family support. This in no way
means that society should not attempt to fill the voids in the socialization process. However, it
is a recognition of the limitations other institutions and individuals face when working with young people.

BM says he learned about community because he grew up in one and like AH he has seen it change. He was taught the values of community by his family, particularly his parents. He says,

BM Um, I was fortunate enough to grow up in one and I've seen it change. I mean, and it wasn't the, it wasn't the "best" community but there was the sense of community and I think it was really at a more macro, at the more micro, I'm sorry, at the micro level in terms of the way that I saw members of my family, particularly my mother and my father, interact with the people who were "our neighbors." And seeing that interaction, I've been taught [inaudible] about community and I think we were fortunate because we lived on a very short street comparatively to a lot of other streets that were in my neighborhood. Um, but we got a chance to know different, you know, [inaudible] through, you know, mainly through school. A lot of us that came up, we were all around the same age, so it was good in that there was a camaraderie. I don't know if that was one of the things that I spoke to but that would definitely be part of community, camaraderie that people have, the ability to have [inaudible], you know, shared experience.

In the response to the question about how people learn about community BM says,

BM Hmm, that's a tough one because you would like to believe that everyone has at some point in time in their life actually experienced community and I think we just have to really be in a setting where community exists. At least for some degree of time, you know. Whatever amount of time that is, but I think it's through exposure. I think, I think that's really what I'm getting at is that it's through exposure.

In order to experience and understand community, a person has to be in a situation where community exists. All of the resources have to be available to reinforce and encourage the desired behaviors. The challenge for society is to find ways to educate, cultivate, and develop community members, particularly when the family and the immediate neighborhood do not have the resources to mentor the person through the process.

PM attributes her sense of community to a nurturing family. She, like other interviewees, has taken the lessons learned or the experiences of community and integrated

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33 The bold text indicates the words that RG emphasized.
them into the essence of who she is, her worldview, and the contributions she needs to make to it.

PM Um, I think that people learn about community through nurturing. Um, and that's not -- Well, that is how I learned about community. You know, I come from a very nurturing, although dysfunctional, background as far as my, you know, childhood, teenage years and all that. Um, but it was very, very nurturing. You know, I come from a family -- My mother comes from a family of 18 children, so I have a multitude of cousins and relatives, um, very, very nurturing, and so I think that that's part of who I am as a nurturer. But I think that everybody that's in a community, even when you're, you know, say for instance it's a condominium association, you're still looking for particular needs to be met based upon whatever, you know, the goal is of the community, of the organization or whatever it is. And, so for me, I'd say that I learned how to fit in with people or be a part of a community based upon my family background. So, I bring that as an adult into, you know, whatever community I'm involved in. Um, although I must say that even though you may have been brought up that way, or you may come from that background, you know, when you go out into the real world as an adult, you do, you know, learn other lessons or see, you know, observe other ways that things are done, but I still think that for me that's a strength I bring, you know, as a nurturer.

The role she feels she should play as a community member is in line with what her strengths and interests are. She believes she has the nature of a nurturer and that is a defining characteristic of her contribution to community.

VJ feels community is something that is experienced and does not believe it is learned. She feels that it is automatic and not something people are consciously aware of. She says,

VJ I don't think it's something you learn. I think it's something you just experience; something you just know. I mean, unless you sit down with somebody in a conversation like this and start picking it apart a lot of people might not even think about it. And I've found that in many "academic discussions" where you talk to classes and classmates about, you know, how you define yourself, you know, and people have asked, you know, it's the first time we had to think about it. I didn't think about it before. I never thought of myself as part of a class, or part of a group, or part of a community, or part of a this, or part of a that. You know, and because it's sort of like asking a fish, you know, how you define water. I mean, you're in it. You know, so, it's so much, it's so much a part of who you are and your very essence. And how do you pull, how do you separate that, pull it apart?

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34 I believe she means that it is not consciously taught. Later to be absorbed, interpreted, and incorporated into the person's being.
Community is modeled behavior and the challenge is to ensure that members of a community are mindful of that fact and behave accordingly. It should not be left up to a select or specific set of community institutions or individuals to perpetuate community. It is in the interests of all members in our society to ensure that their actions reflect the type of community they want to live in.

Among the interviewees, there is no consensus about community being learned. Where there is agreement is that through some process individuals become aware of what their roles and obligations are. They make the choice whether or not to accept the responsibility and obligation of membership and to engage in behaviors exemplifying the best that the community has to offer.

The belief that community is understood, for example, by observing, mentoring, modeling behavior, and learning has implications for those of us who believe certain segments of the general population are disengaged or disaffected. It means that we are not powerless. Individually, as well as collectively, we are able to participate in activities that strengthen and sustain the community.

There is a sense among the interviewees that community however one becomes aware of or experiences it, becomes a part of who the person is. It is internalized and plays an important role in attitudes, activities, and level of engagement. The manner in which institutions, members and non-members demonstrate (express) community responsibility and commitment is critical to the well-being and sustainability of civil society.

Community is a tradition

Community as a tradition are the ways in which people continue the rituals of their parents, grandparents, families and extended families. It is embodied in the things that people
do during the holidays, for birthdays, as church members, as family members, or members of an extended family network. When community is part of tradition, it can provide comfort in times of loss and joy and celebration in the moments of success.

Sometimes the traditions do not continue after the loss of a loved one. TJ tells the story of trying to continue with his parents’ traditions in his own family.

TJ With my sons, I go to my -- now that my wife has died, you know, I go to my oldest son's and he and his wife will have dinner over, you know, over there and if they don't, um, you know, one of the friends will invite me. I know they kind of feel sorry for me. Let's invite ... and his kids over 'cuz you don't want ... -- I can cook. I mean I just can't cook a turkey or a ham. That's all, but, ah, we'll go there because I can remember growing up with my, with my grandparents. We used to play pekino, my God, for hours and we carried that on in my family, monopoly. Up until my wife died. It was like a ... family tradition, and it was fun because, you know, you're playing, you know, penny ante pekino, or, you know, and everybody wants to, you know, win, but, you know, nobody gets really worked up. When you realize that you've played for three hours you maybe won a dollar-fifty and somebody lost a dolla-fifty, but you know, you know, it's just fun. You know it's good, good clean, family entertainment, you know. And you'd fall asleep somewhere and you'd wake up and then you'd go play cards and every year on New Year's Eve, ah, we'd go to somebody's house and we start New Year's with a good meal and start playing cards.

TJ desires to carry on the traditions of his parents and grandparents but as family circumstances change, continuing the traditions is difficult.

DB believes that we can participate in activities that become traditions in our families and teach the lessons of community. For example, parents who volunteer children to serve meals during the holiday at a homeless shelter or participate in toy and clothing drives are laying the foundation for the development of a commitment to community; Or, at least an awareness of other people and their needs. He says he began his family tradition as a way of sharing with his son what it means to be a part of a community. In the following excerpt, he offers suggestions on ways in which people can become involved.

DB Uh, yeah. Life-changing, life-changing. Take time out of your busy day, and go and volunteer your time for a couple hours, and go stand in line, and then go distribute food to some elderly people that's just waiting for you to show up. You know. And you just, you just
won't believe. They're there, and they totally waited on you to arrive. You know? And it really
does have an impact. And that, you walk away from that feeling like, wow. And I will
recommend uh, any man, woman, child take your family, take your kids out to experience
something like that. And that kind of helps fill that need to help others. Um, and that there is
a big need, you know. We have a responsibility to pass along our knowledge to the extent that
we can. We have a responsibility to educate. And that guidance comes from someone else.
Um, it could be, you know, family. Um, it could be by mentoring. Um, it could be by, um, by
way of an interest in a particular subject matter. So, it could be a number of different ways.
So, sometimes, you know, one will become involved in it. Because it's not a matter of learning
about it, because my sense is they learn, simply by being -- But my thing is, sometimes they
have to be guided to become involved.

His family’s activities are the first step in the creation of a family tradition, a tradition. A whose
purpose is to instill in his son a sense of service. He will use these experiences as he continues
to cultivate his son’s spiritual and moral values. This is also a characteristic of membership.

An individual’s efforts to create a tradition or instill the value of service in others are part of
the member’s civic engagement activities and demonstrated commitment and investment in a
community. Activities such as these are a source of a community’s social capital.

PD uses an approach similar to DB’s as she tries to ensure that community continues
to be passed on from one generation to another in her family. She says that the tradition of
community is similar to using a certain brand of merchandise in your household. You use the
product because that is what was done in your grandparents’ home or your own family when
you were growing up. In a sense community becomes a family’s preference. PD says,

PD And I think it's because I come from a tradition of people that, that did it. So, it was,
it was just passed on. You know, like the family recipe. Or, if your mother used Tide, you use
Tide. (Laughing) You know. (Laughing) If your mother was Baptist, you're Baptist. It was
that kinda thing. Where it was, it was just expected and then you just did it.

PD’s aunt is the person who began the process of cultivating a spirit of community in her life.

Her goal is to continue this tradition with her niece and grandson. She says,

PD That's right. My niece is already organizin' um a younger group of young women at
the church, teaching them how to play tumbrels and mime. And um, when she was comin' along, someone that was older than her was doin' that for her. So, you have to give back to the
community. You know, you, you can't just take, take, take you have to give back. So, it's a
small way of giving back. Volunteering is a small way of giving back to the community. ... And um, I think that, that's why it's so important that people pass down their traditions. And not only pass down the language, if they have it, cause many of us have lost the language, but they also pass down the traditions and um the ceremonies. So, that, so that you know certain things are gonna happen. If grandma dies, you know we're havin' the funeral at such-and-such a place and all these people are gonna come and bring food, or whatever. And if so-and-so graduates, you know the thing. You can, you can predict. And that's because you're part of this community that supports you and values you in, in whatever you're working on. So that, for me, the black community is the most inclusive.

Community shapes the character and personal outlook of members. By participating in community, members learn the importance of the role or function they have in that community. This is the first step in the process of engendering loyalty, commitment, and participation on the part of community members.

Community meets a need

In all human activities, need in general (generically) asserts itself as a condition of human life. There is nothing to human life that does not correspond to some need or does not create a need, even in the most remote reaches of culture and technology, let alone in economic life. In addition to individual needs (which are satisfied only socially), there are social needs proper and political needs, immediate needs and cultivated needs, natural needs and artificial needs (Lefebvre, 1968:39-40).

The persistence of community may be a function of its ability to meet multiple needs of members. The interviewees feel that community meets or should meet all of a person's needs. It is where people shop, work, socialize with others, and go to church. All of these activities contribute to personal growth and help a person to achieve some level of satisfaction in life.

The study group identifies belonging, affirmation, support and acceptance among the social-psychological needs that community fulfills in people’s lives. PK’s communities address her need for a sense of belonging; provide a sense of the familiar, and a social network. They are a point of reference and affirm who she is and the values she has. The ways in which are
her needs are addressed may be unique to her circumstances but she feels there is something universal about these needs.

PK  Um, I guess I could probably answer that. I'm just going to step out there and answer it for myself and what I believe other people, you know would need as well. I think that it's a sense of belonging. A sense of the familiar, um, um, a sense of being able to, um, you know, count on someone or something, um, especially for African Americans. ... Um, there's a comfort zone. There's a commonality that we all share, um, you know, things that we have done, you know, that we have heard about or that our families have been involved in, in the past. You know, there's, it's a network of people, um, that you help one another. You know, and, um, you know, it's a social network. So, I think that's what, you know, that's what fulfills for me um, the, as far as on a personal level.

On a larger scale, I would say that community has, for me, has fulfilled for me a more cultural, a cultural awareness. There have been a lot more cultural, uh, events relating to, not just African American, but also other racial groups, Asians, Latino, just by living in this neighborhood, I can't help not but be part of the cultural events of this community.

VJ is someone that AH would say brings her community with her. As she thinks about the impact community has on her life, she reiterates that community reaffirms and supports who she is.

VJ  In my life it's a sense of groundedness. A sense of knowing where I came from. Why I am who I am. What shapes my worldview. What has helped to define my value system. I think I get an affirmation of my worldview. I also get a backdrop in which to reflect upon ideas with people whose backgrounds are similar to mine. Particularly because I have to operate in a majority society and the groups that I belong to can be marginalized in this society. And the values aren't always the same. So there could be some inherent conflict there. So the way I choose to go about doing things, what I value, what I hold as valuable may not always be held that way in the majority society. So there could be conflicts. And it helps me to have people who are similar to me to go back and discuss these things with and figure out ways in which to cope, in which to continue to thrive. In which to continue to live, you know, in a sense of comfort. And also to be held in what I believe in.

She chooses not to ‘speak for others.’ What she does share is the idea that while the specific need or needs may be different, there is something in the lives of individuals that community provides or a need that is being addressed. She says,

VJ  That’s all I can do is assume that it could be similar for people because people tend to congregate around those very themes that I mentioned before. Ethnicity, location, common background, values, and people tend to you know generate social clusters around those things. So there must be some kind of fabric holding that together.
What she provides us with is the perspective that while the specific need or needs may be different, there is a generalized need in the lives of individuals that community meets or a need that is being addressed.

JE is the only interviewee to explicitly say that community meets all of the needs of an individual. Perhaps we can surmise from the other interviewee responses and reactions to community that they share a similar belief. He believes that collectively all of the aspects of community, including institutions, people, services, and amenities meet the needs of an individual.

JE Well, I think, I think it fulfills, um, every need. I think that's where you have your sanity within your community. It's where you shop, where you work and where you socialize so it has a whole lot more to do with how you base life even spiritually, where you go to church. All of those things, um, contribute to your, your personal satisfaction in life and, and your personal growth so it, it means a lot. Those things all play a big part in how you develop within your own community. Your community plays a big role in that.

MGB makes a subtle distinction between whether or not she is being asked to respond to what she thinks community should do or actually does in terms of addressing the need or needs of its members. She first says what she thinks community should do and then tells me what she thinks it does.

MGB Well, I think community should absolutely offer people a sense of stabilization. A sense that, um, not to be afraid of your neighbor. A sense of extended family. A sense of, of cohesiveness around, um, basic things that people want. I mean the mix of community. The ability to be able to feel safe walking down the street in your community. The ability to be able to feel comfortable to speak to a child, whether it's in a positive way, um, or in a way that's disciplinary. Now when, when you see a child doing something wrong, to feel comfortable that you can say something to that child about their behavior to correct it. Um, I think community is a sense of feeling a part of a mix of people that have some of the same concerns that you have around the quality of life where you live and whether that quality of life is having a positive or negative impact on the community.

What, what community does right now in this time frame short of the turn of the century is that I think we've moved away from this notion of reaching out, uh, getting to know one another. I think there's a natural fear, uh, some of it is culturally driven, uh, because, in, particularly in the black community now we have a number of different cultures and that really, I don't think we're really recognized... When I was coming up because if you were black in
skin tone, it really didn't matter where you came from because the status quo of the system was that that was the predominate factor that determined what you were gonna get.

MGB's assessment of what a community should do is similar to the comments and observations other interviewees make. She feels that the larger community is better served when small groupings are created and work together collectively. MGB sees it as a means of strengthening a community.

MGB We're much stronger in our strength by building smaller nucleus communities throughout our geographical area. And then those smaller nucleuses come together and form a larger nucleus that says this is what we all agree upon that needs to be done or we're all gonna work together as, as, a team to make this happen and so I think that the horizon is phenomenal.

This way, the more parochial issues and concerns can be addressed while at the same time building the capacity to deal with the broader or larger issues facing the community. This is a means of strengthening a community. What MGB describes is similar to JF's communities within communities.

ROB says that community can have a positive impact upon the development of an individual. He also understands the potentially devastating effects isolation and alienation can have on a person's development. Using prisons as his example, he describes some of the negative effects of isolation on a person. He says,

ROB I, I personally feel very strongly that, um, uh, the positive reinforcement that can come from community is important in your, you know, full development as, as a human. I think, I think if we become too isolated or too separated from people, uh, then our mental development, our spiritual development, our intellectual development begins to suffer and can cause all of that to degenerate into something that I think is not healthy for society. Um, so I mean that's, that's why it's really, it's really a fine line for prison systems when they have to isolate prisoners within the prison because human engagement is something that everybody yearns for. But when you isolate people like that, it's almost impossible to, to correct their behavior or develop them in any healthy form or fashion, uh, because that isolation causes them to degenerate even further, but what they should do in situations like that I don't know, but I know that when you isolate people, then it causes people's mental capacity, intellectual capacity to, to, to suffer.
This is an extreme case of anomie. Unfortunately, too many people experience anomie in less restrictive environments, for example, transitioning from high school to college and unfriendly work environments.

PM’s perspective reinforces the idea that each person is a member of multiple communities and the basis of membership and benefits or rewards of the membership are specific to each individual community. She suggests that the needs are related to the specific community. However, this does not mean that a person will not derive the same benefits or rewards from more than one community. She says,

PM  Um, I think it -- Well, it all depends why I'm in those communities. Um, like the community of being a mother, a parent, or whatever, you know, that fulfills a certain need that, you know, I wanted to be, you know, I chose to be a mother. You know, so I get something from that. But one of my most important communities I think is, is being an African American woman. And also being able to bring those particular unique qualities that make me this particular African American woman into my core circle of those particular friends, you know, that I was talking about, that community, um, because, you know, there's a lot of nurturing there. So, for me, I mean, it's great to be a wife, it's great to be a mother, but I think as far as me being a person, an individual person, that's where I get my greatest, um -- Repeat the question again.

Members have an expectation that the community will meet their needs. Community cannot make demands of its members while at the same time not fulfilling its obligations. Community's perceived value and importance in people’s lives determine whether or not it will be given a lesser or greater place of importance in a personally defined hierarchy. The extent to which the community is effectively responding to the needs of its members, we are able to at least conceptually, measure the strength or health of a community because there should be demonstrable civic participation, support of local institutions, and increasing social capital.

Community is everyday life

One of the most compelling findings of this research is that community is everyday life and a part of daily life. There is not one community for individuals but memberships in
different communities. Sometimes the communities are a function of various roles or identities. They may be formal and organized such as professional associations or work environments; others are informal and based loosely upon shared interests, goals, values, and traditions. These communities are not separate and apart from the individuals who comprise the membership.
FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND

The participants in this study are likely to disagree with his assessment because they believe in the agency and the ability of individuals to create and sustain communities.

Race, Culture, Ethnicity and The Decline of Community

You wanna talk about a white picket fence. Years ago, the people who lived in this cul-de-sac would come home from work on Friday and not leave until Monday when it was time to go to work. I remember one time when one of our neighbors came by looking for us and we weren’t home. He was hungry so he made himself breakfast and turned around and went back home. That was how it was for all of us in this area here. It was really nice. You didn’t have to lock your doors. Everybody looked out for each other. That sure was a time. Reminiscences of family members who have lived in their cul-de-sac for over twenty years.

The quote from two of my family members is included both to show the power of memory and community and the persistence of community. Today only one of the original neighbors remains. While listening to the stories about that time in their lives and the lifecycle of their cul-de-sac community, you realize that the stories are lessons about developing ourselves, relating to each other and the world around us, and, finally, cultivating imagination and believing in a world full of possibilities. What seems a passive experience is ultimately an active and important part of the transmission of community.

All of the participants directly or indirectly refer to an African American community. Sometimes, they discuss the African American community within the context of a discrete or identifiable geographical area such as a neighborhood or street. However, limiting community to a geographical boundary does not accurately reflect its breadth and scope. In reality, there does not have to be geographical proximity or identification for there to be a connection to the African American community. The reason is that the participants also define community based upon a sense of shared values, culture, history, or race. As PD reflects on her understanding of community, she says,
Hm. I think when I look at it that way, I w—my first instinct would be to look at the neighborhood that I’m presently living in. But, that would be shortsighted because actually I’m part of Black community where I work at. I’m part of a Black community where I worship. I’m part of a Black community when I, you know, I’m pursuin’ higher ed. So I think it, it must be a broader one, where you could even run into someone in another state that’s dealing with the same kinda issues that you’re dealing with. That could be considered part of your Black community.

Some of the participants accepted me, not because I was local, but because I was considered part of the larger African American community.

Community offers an opportunity for people to see others who look like them, share their values, and share a common sense of history. LMB reflects on community in the following way,

LMB Cultural balance. Of seeing and being around people who look like me, and basically think along the same lines, values as me. Um, same, similar social structures, you know, church. [Where I live is very diverse but in other ways.] Whereas I can go to [City] and have certain concentrations of folk in the same, you know, looking like me, same social, economic groups or whatever, same kind of social structure. That kind of thing.

These sentiments are shared by the other study participants.

The study participants feel that community helps to sustain and support them. It happens whether the participants are individually or collectively engaged in an activity. This means that as long as it meets this, as well as other individual needs, individuals will invest in and participate in the life of a community.

BM states that being African American does not affect community, at least in the sense of an individual being particularly conscious of that identity and allowing the identity to direct or dictate behavior. In fact, he suggests that the imposition of race (African American) to the definition or interpretation of community, leads to a very different perspective and discussion about community for individuals. He remarks,

BM I think there’s – For me it doesn’t because I think there’s some real core – I think there’s some real – I think that irregardless of the color of your skin, there’s some things that
most people generally want and generally need. We all got have air. We all got have clean water. We all want to prolong. We all have something to aspire to. We all want – We all want to be loved. We all – You now, all these things are there – you know, but I, I – And I think the community in its truest senses speak to, to all of these things. Um, I think it just gets played out a little differently, you know, but I think the definition stays the same.

Community and race are not necessarily connected. Yet, at some point in the experience of community, race, gender, class, or religion may be present. Even if only to become part of the subtext of a particular community moment.

From this research, we learn that individuals are part of multiple communities. These communities reflect the highly personal and individual definitions and expectations of each community member. These circles of community play a significant role in the perpetuation of civil society and culture. However, the decline of civil society thesis does not address the issue of multiple communities. Etzioni appears to acknowledge these multiple communities when he discusses the role of the supracommunity in society. However, there appears to be no serious investigation of the role and potential impacts of the multiple communities in which an individual has memberships or be actively involved in civic engagement or civic participation. These multiple communities represent obstacles and opportunities for the social commentators to achieve their goals of increasing civic sensibilities and participation.

The majority of the participants agree with the decline of community commentary when it comes to participation. The difference is the emphasis they place on the role and responsibility of the community to the members. Community has a responsibility to its members and should do no less than it asks or expects of them.

This study demonstrates that African Americans maintain social networks and participate in a number of different communities. These social networks and circles of community are the mechanisms by which community persists and is learned. Social networks
and circles of community are also the locations in which social capital is cultivated and sustained. Recognizing the importance of social capital to community survival and sustainability, Putnam writes,

For a variety of reasons, life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital. In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. When economic and political negotiation is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced. At the same time, networks of civic engagement embody past success at collaboration. Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broadened the participants’ sense of self, developing the “I” into the “we,” or (in the language of rational-choice theorists) enhancing the participants’ “taste” for collective benefit (Putnam, 1993:67).

Again, this is a far-reaching statement and there has been no evidence put forth by Putnam that it is generalizable across all communities and for all groups as he would make it seem. That is the test of his theory. In some ethnic enclaves his idea about the value of having such a community may be borne out, but again not for everyone and not necessarily for an indefinite period of time. As long as individuals have a social connection or network, some level of observable community exists. The issue is the context and relative strength of the ties or binds.

The African American community is not the only circle of community in the lives of study group. Not only is the African American ‘community’ not monolithic, but also people are members of many communities at the same time. Whether or not they articulate it as such, it is nevertheless true. In reality, it represents one of the many circles of community that are part of the study group members’ lives. This means that many of the community experiences of the study participants are not limited, for example, by race, age, social class, or gender. It also means that there are possible points of common ground and interest in terms of their experiences of community with individuals who are not part of an African American
community. The experience that I had in my course demonstrates the universality of community. The fact that a diverse group of individuals could express such similar meanings and feelings of community demonstrates this convincingly.

Regardless of the participants’ differences, they all feel that the historical role and experience of community in the lives of African Americans has changed. CG says,

CG Historically, it’s been exactly that making things better; paving the way for other people to come behind it. If you, I mean you can look at the progressions from history where as black people we were, we weren’t anywhere before. We couldn’t obtain an education; we couldn’t have real jobs; we couldn’t get paid; we couldn’t vote; we couldn’t do so much. And it was the personal responsibility of someone living in a community who got tired and said that they didn’t want it to be like that anymore and stood up to make things better in that community. So, historically, it’s all been about paving the way. And that’s where as a member of the community and, as black people we have to continue to do today ’cause we’re still not to the point where we should be. And we may never be that way. But, it’s an obligation to continue what history has already done.

As RC reflects on the intersection between race and community, he says,

RC Well, you know, um even, in, in America, this kind of experience begins during slavery time when it was um illegal for uh Blacks to gather three or more together. Uh, they always had the church community. And from the church and through um, secret language and scripture they were able to pass on information to each other, to have a form of communication process and socialization process. If they couldn’t dance and come together in uh on the plantation, they clearly could do this in the name of, of praising the Lord. So, it, community has always played a very strong, strong part in um Black folks’ existence. You, you know, as a matter of fact, I think that the southern uh Black folks have an advantage over the northern Blacks. They have been able to keep community in tact.

When, when segregation, was the, was the uh the norm and the law in this nation the southern people utilized Black uh professionals. They established Black institutions, both banking and insurance wise, monetary institutions. They established hospitals. They established schools, and, and hired both secondary and higher education teachers. So, they, they built their foundations.

Uh, the northern Blacks however moved in the urban areas and, and in [this area], in particular, we were programmed to integrate. And, and, institutions of our own, other than churches and funeral parlors did not really exist. We owned a very few stores. Mostly mom and pop stuff, if we did own it. We own no – huge businesses. No institutions at all. So, uh we have no completely all black schools with all black school teachers, or any of that. And uh, for the most part it seems to be thwarted and, and kind of um uh politically uh annihilated.

The whole notion of coming together to form these kinds of institutions, uh we’re called separatists. We’re called uh, you know. We’re blamed – when we try to form our own
institutions, we’re blamed, for, for being uh racist or discriminatory ourselves. It’s a real funny thing but uh Hispanic folks can come into our neighborhoods uh people from the Caribbean can come in uh people from other – all other parts of the world can come in and form these communities and, and, get money to service the, their own folks because their language and cultures are in tact. And, and, they’re encouraged. But, African Americans, are discouraged.

These microlevel exchanges and interpretations of reality are adaptations to instances of alienation or limitations individuals feel are imposed upon them as a result of macrolevel forces that include racial and political pressures. Nearly every one of the participants spoke about the fact that their experiences as African Americans necessitated having associational and communal relationships in order to sustain them.

**Collective Memory of Community**

There exists for the participants a collective memory of community. This memory is a function of experiences, some similar and dissimilar. They each reflect upon their experiences with family, friends, neighbors and their communities and connect those experiences to how they view the world and their sense of responsibility and obligation to it. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) in the book, *On Collective Memory*, describes the role that a family plays in transmitting knowledge and history to its members. What we learn from the study participants is that knowledge, particularly cultural knowledge, is being transmitted not just within the family, but in every social interaction, whether it is with an individual or an institutional actor.

The perspectives of the study group help us to understand a seeming contradiction or paradox. If people believe there is a crisis of community spirit and attitudes and a decline of civil society, particularly in key institutions such as the family, schools, and businesses then how is it possible for them to say that people still have a sense of community? It is in the day-to-day activities or in close personal relationships in members’ lives, that core values, definitions, experiences, and desires remain. If individuals do not know their next-door
neighbors, it does not necessarily mean that they feel a sense of alienation or do not care about their community. Other dynamics may be operating that are not easily identifiable or observed.

In African American communities, Carol Stack found that there is a great deal of informal association and support networking going on. She demonstrated in her book, *All Our Kin* that through immediate and extended families (including friends and ‘play family members’), residents were able to carry on in their daily lives. In her book *call to home* Stack discusses the migration of northern blacks to the south sometimes to be near family, but often times to be near their roots. In her research she finds that for northern blacks, the south whether or not they had traveled to the communities their parents or grandparents had lived, is a place where life is better, people are more connected to the land; there they can raise their families and instill in their children the values and morals of their forefathers and foremothers.

**Civic Engagement**

From this research, we find out that there are circles of community. We just need to be able to recognize them and accept that there are different ways in which people look at what they do and their responsibilities to themselves, their neighbors and the community at large. These circles of community are significant as a counterbalance to the decline of community.

Decisions about civic engagement are often based upon the dynamics between institutional actors, members, and non-members in a community. As a research topic, it is generally analyzed at the macrolevel as aggregated data such as church attendance, volunteering, voting, and memberships in social and professional organizations. Little attention is given to the microlevel interactions, that is, to the informal social and civic
transactions occurring routinely in nearly every situation or setting. People are involved in
community every day. From the responses about membership, we see that people are
members of multiple communities. We also know that the participants believe individuals are
either actively or passively involved as members in a community. With the exception of two,
the participants believe that as long as a person lives in an area, he or she should participate in
the life of that community. The manner of participation is left up to the individual. However,
no member should engage in activities that are harmful to the community.

The decline of civil society commentators are fairly dogmatic and judgmental as they
discuss their ideas and attitudes about civic engagement. There appears to be no place in their
view of civic engagement for individuals to exercise autonomy or independence and thereby
make a choice about participating in community activities. Etzioni, Putnam, and the larger
society are being coercive because there is an expectation of participation as opposed to
voluntary action.

Using survey data to make assumptions about the motivations or intentions of
individuals in their interpersonal interactions is a limiting factor in the decline of civil society
commentaries. The survey data used, particularly in the work of Putnam, Etzioni, and a
number of other society social commentators, reflect what individuals report they do. The
data do not explain why or help us to uncover the true value or meaning of the activities to
those individuals.

Based upon this research, we understand that the roles and responsibilities that people
have in their circles of communities influence civic participation and engagement. Civic
participation and engagement are also subject to obstacles limiting participation such as
lifecycle, family and employment commitments, geography, social and cultural characteristics
of the community, and opportunities to participate. In the peer-to-peer interactions, value-laden perceptions about the contributions of members play a significant role in the strength and stability of the relationships. The quality of the relationships between institutions and individuals affects whether or not members will support the efforts and activities of the larger community.

The public discourse seems to focus on the activities of the individual or personal motivations of a community member. However, what the research from this study tells us is that there are structural deterrents and sometimes barriers to participation. Based upon an analysis of the interviews, a number of obstacles to civic engagement and participation are identified.

The study participants identify the following as obstacles to civic engagement and participation in community activities:

- An inordinate number of demands on what participants perceive to be a limited amount of time. One of the conditions of modernity is that people are saturated with sensory images, multi-tasking, and competing obligations for time, energy, and resources.

- Intergenerational fears. In our society, there is a generational divide both in terms of understanding each other and perceptions about the need to participate in the larger community. Many adults are afraid of the youth in their communities. Adults fear the young people; some of the young people act out their frustration at being misunderstood by adults. Often, neither of them has a sense of who the other is and what is valued.

- A sense of being vulnerable and subjected to harm. Physical safety and a psychological sense of comfort about the neighborhood and being in their homes are important to the participants.

- A lack of understanding of the role that a person plays or can play in a given community or set of communities. Unless an individual understands the value of their contribution to a community, their involvement may be limited or destructive.
• A lack of appropriate opportunities to participate. It is important that there be
activities that are of interest to a wide variety of people so that each person has the
chance to choose something of interest or importance. Communities have boundaries.
Not everyone is allowed to participate.

• A lack of trust in people and many of the institutions that comprise our society.
The interviewees state that people do not share or have confidence in each other as
they once did. One of the interviewees referred to this as a loss of neighborliness.
This lack of trust in people reinforces and is reinforced by a lack of trust in different
community institutions. It represents an obstacle to participation and a barrier to a
community’s sustainability.

• A person’s stage in the lifecycle. Priorities, needs, abilities, and interests change
over time. These changes affect the choices people make and determine the
opportunities available for civic engagement and participation.

• Exposure to sensory images and projections through different types of media such
as television, radio, and certain types of music affect participation. The participants
agree with the social commentators on the decline of civil society when they suggest
that people are investing too much of their time watching television and playing
videogames.

• Financial circumstances may require a person to put in more hours on the job or
obtain a second job. In those instances, concern for the economic stability of the
household takes precedence over becoming active in a community organization or
supporting a community event.

• The demands of kinship relationships and attendant role responsibilities make it
difficult for individuals to balance the demands and time commitments from several
different quarters. Every community has expectations about participation. While the
nature of the expectations may differ across and between communities, the member
still has to respond in some way.

This list of obstacles is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to lead us to any particular
conclusions. It is presented as a way of providing specific examples of what people are
experiencing and how these obstacles impact decisions on communicating with neighbors,
volunteering to serve on boards or engaging in other activities that are perceived to reflect
membership in a community.
Scholars and most of the participants are in agreement on the changing patterns of civic engagement and participation. What are some ways to engender or rekindle the desire to participate? One approach a community or group of individuals might take is to create a community education campaign. The primary purpose of the campaign is to provide information on the various activities and opportunities for community members to participate. As people become more informed about what is available in the community, some will follow up to obtain additional information or choose to participate. Another purpose is to provide social, cultural, and educational resources for different segments of the population. It may be a challenge because of the diverse constituencies in a community. However, if successful this means that a community will have more involved citizens and create the possibility for increased social interaction between the members.

Acts of Community

The ‘acts of community’ are represented in the everyday activities of living. The activities that the decline of civil society proponents identify as evidence of civic engagement is limiting. There is a breadth to the types of social activities that people participate in. The participants in this study locate acts of community within, for example, the family, workplace, neighborhood, church, community organizations, and associational relationships. These acts of community may be represented by membership in formal organizations but they are also revealed when people participate informally by helping a neighbor or a stranger.

Acts of community are personal and often motivated by individual definitions and experiences of community. Members’ definitions and perceptions of community are not divorced from the choices they make about participation in community activities. The
research findings illustrate the relationship between definitions of community, choices about civic engagement, and multiple community memberships are the following:

- Personal and professional definitions of community may be the same. In some cases, individuals are able to incorporate personal definitions into the way they approach and perform their activities on the job. The organizational culture, mission, and leadership play an important role in allowing the integration of the personal definition of community with work performed in a job.

- Community can be an inner-directed expression of self. For people who are motivated in this way, community is internalized and becomes part of who they are and how they relate to the world. These individuals choose to participate in activities that are an extension of themselves and a reflection of their values and priorities.

- Definitions of community help to frame and define such personal and intimate relationships as interactions between members in a family, extended family and certain circles of community.

- For most people, community is everyday life.

Community Expectations

The decline of civil society social commentaries and the associated chastisement of community members are based upon a fundamental and unwavering belief that members have an obligation and responsibility to participate and contribute to the life of their subcommunities, or circles of communities. In this regard, the social commentators are no different from the majority of this study’s participants. Of the twenty-four individuals participating in this research project, only two feel that there should be no expectation of participation or contribution from community members. The two interviewees feel that a person should have a choice in terms of their level of engagement in their communities.

Community membership can be based upon such things as geographical area, common interests, shared values, a biological characteristic such as race or gender, or history. Membership in a community or multiple communities is dynamic and adaptive. It is need-
based, ontological, ideological, philosophical, economic, political, experiential and spiritual. Every day people are navigating between various communities.

Every community has a set of expectations related to membership – qualifications, roles, responsibilities, and participation. The majority of the interviewees feel that a member should be engaged in some type of community activity. According to the study participants, specific ways to participate in a community include mentoring young people, volunteering for community organizations, getting involved in a church and its activities, and attending community meetings and becoming actively involved. The study participants are flexible in their willingness to consider most types of activities as evidence of a member’s acceptance of a responsibility to the community. As long as the activities are not harmful to the community, the specific activity, frequency, and duration are not important to them.

There is an aspect of reciprocity in the model of community presented by the study group. An expectation of reciprocity that is not obvious in the decline of community theory. Community’s responsibility is to meet the needs of members, support and encourage development of leaders and the acceptance of members. There are also expectations for it to provide basic municipal services, means of production and commerce, educational institutions, housing, health and safety, political and governmental institutions, cultural institutions, religious and social institutions. The social-psychological obligations include providing continuity and frame of reference, and supporting and strengthening a member. The community has to be actively involved in the creation of a safe, healthy, sustainable environment that, in turn, may lead members to participate.
Expressions of Community

One of the difficulties with researching community is that it has so many different meanings and the meanings change depending upon the context. The meanings and definitions of community are a function of individual and institutional interpretations. Expressions of community are the definitions and meanings the participants associate with the concept of community. These definitions of community are ranked, prioritized and used by the interviewees to guide their actions in the public and private spheres of their lives.

Community is a physical and metaphorical object. Communities are also related to interests, identities, geographical locations, relationships, community activities, religious or spiritual affiliations and work associations or affiliations. Community is the invisible hand that guides and motivates the study participants. The study participants incorporate community into who they are and what they do.

Characteristics of community that emerge from this research are:

- Community can be personal and professional, and there is often a difference between the public and private expression and experience of community.
- Community is ultimately a set of interlocking communities with different levels of diversity and freedom of access, entry and exit.
- Community is a societal form that creates its own set of norms, proscribed and ascribed roles, values and mores.
- Community is an expression and an experience.
- Community is both a process and an attitude. It appears at times static and at others quite dynamic.
- Community generates social capital, not the other way around.

The foundation of community is based upon the multiple layers of definitions, meanings, experiences, relationships and individual and collective perceptions of the world.
An issue for sustaining community is whether or not the members themselves have a collective sense and acceptance of the nature of community and their responsibility to it. This awareness is key to ensuring the development of a set of interconnections that can lead to community growth.

Community Transformation

In any community, the resources are mediated by and through its institutions. These institutions are responsible for either creating or managing the economic, social, political, cultural and spiritual relationships between members. The relationship between these institutions and individuals is based upon a complex set of dynamics. Certain institutions such as political, educational, financial and medical are responsible for addressing specific needs and interests of community members and non-members. The extent to which this is achieved is based upon factors that are often beyond the control of the individual.

Community organizations have the power and potential to build social capital and develop community members. Some of the interviewees discuss the fact that community organizations sometimes create and define the terms and conditions of community. As a result, these organizations can encourage or discourage the participation of community members in events or activities. The interviewees believe that any institution meeting the needs of a community is important to support and sustain. They also recognize that if members do not feel the same way, those institutions will decline.

There is a history and tradition of community among African Americans. Institutions and location such as towns, schools, churches, banks, local businesses, benevolent societies, fraternal and professional organizations are part of that tradition. In communities around the country, African Americans informally and formally create social, educational, political, and
cultural organizations as ways of building social and cultural capital. As long as individuals continue to invest in and commit to their communities in these ways, we have evidence that counters the decline of community argument.

Some of the characteristics of community relevant to the decline of civil society social commentary are the following:

(1) Community is a social construction that is treated as a social fact and because of this community theory, studies and the current critique about community and the decline of civil society may not present a complete picture of social interaction;

(2) Community is culturally determined; sociologists and anthropologists alike recognize that different societal groups have different values, mores and traditions. I believe that just as individuals perceive health, religion, social and gender relations within the context of culture, community definitions and perceptions of obligation, reciprocity, and involvement are perceived in that context as well; and

(3) Community is ontologically and phenomenologically experienced.

In the macrolevel structural-functionalist analysis, the society changes because of innovations in technology. These innovations have an effect on the economic system and social order of the society. While the microlevel interpretivist model does not help to identify the specific locus of change, it does enable us to identify and understand the social, cultural, psychological, and historical contexts that both enable and constrain the creation and perpetuation of community.

This research project is not an attempt at dueling theoretical perspectives with some of the more vocal and well-known proponents of the decline of civil society theory of social change. It approaches community and perceptions on the causes of social transformation.
from the perspective of individuals. It also demonstrates the ongoing difficulty with any discussions about community – that of definition. For the sake of this study, community has been approached as though it is disconnected from other parts of society, and yet it is not. Community is layers of definitions, meanings, experiences, relationships and interpretations about the world.

Also, the work presented is not based upon exhaustive research and analysis because it is intended to open the door to further investigation into the phenomenological experiences of community by individuals who, in this particular instance, are African Americans. However, the issues raised by this research are not limited to African Americans; this research strategy is applicable to any group.

In racial, ethnic and cultural communities, there may in fact be a thriving civil society. Racial and ethnic groups participate within their communities and social capital and social responsibility are evident. Race, culture, and ethnicity play a significant role in the persistence of community. They serve as a point of reference for individuals in terms of identifying members, offering opportunities to participate in community activities, and affirming their sense of self and self-worth.

At the conclusion of I Robot, Isaac Asimov presents a pessimistic view of the devolution of community and the transformation of the economic system. He writes,

Only the Machines know, and they are going there and taking us with them...Mankind has lost its own say in its future. It never had any, really. It was always at the mercy of economic and sociological forces it did not understand--at the whims of climate, and the fortunes of war (1985:192).

In the search for answers to questions about such complex issues as community, decline of civil society and the associated loss of social capital, we need to be open to different
perspectives, analyses, explanations and ways of framing the issues and approaches that are taken. In the end, all of us are seeking an elusive, socially-defined, and historically-grounded understanding of the society and world in which we live.
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APPENDIX

Study Participant Profiles

RC
RC is a male in his early 60s and the Executive Director of a social service agency. Community is a vocation for RC. In addition to his ongoing civic engagement, RC is involved in his neighborhood and helped create a neighborhood association. While president of the association, his group created a Neighborhood Watch and successfully built new, affordable housing units on vacant property in the neighborhood. RC is a former supervisor.

AH
AH is a male who works as a counselor for a community-based organization. At the time of the interview, he was in his mid-40s. Also, he was trying to help his daughter (who was eight years old at the time) understand community responsibility, family and community traditions. Community for him is as much a vocation as anything else. AH is a co-worker of RC and VB. His interview was conducted jointly with VB. AH is a former co-worker.

AH’s community experience is different from the other interviewees because he grew up on a southern coastal sea island. He helps us to consider the role of tradition on rites of passage, the transmission of cultural values, and its impact on the persistence and sustainability of community.

VB
VB is a male who works as a counselor and program manager at a community agency. He was in his early 40s when AH, his co-worker, and he were interviewed. During the interview, AH and he commented that assisting me with my research was an example of how they believe community should work.

VB has been involved in community work since his college days. When not at work, he participates in his fraternal organization and mentors young males. VB is a former co-worker.

AP
AP is a female and at the time of the interview was an administrative assistant and housing counselor at a homeless family shelter. She has since moved on to become the director of a housing program in another agency. At the time of the interview, AP was in her late 40s. She incorporated the ‘community’ of her agency in her interactions with the agency’s clients. Like AH, RC and DB community is a vocation for her. AP is a former co-worker.

What is interesting about AP is that she is a former client of the agency. At one point during the interview, she talks about showing the clients the same kind of care and consideration she received. I think she best exemplifies how an individual is able to ‘pay it forward.’
VJ
VJ is a female and works as the director of counseling at a homeless family shelter. At the time of the interview, VJ was in her late 30s. AP and VJ work for the same homeless family shelter. She infuses spirituality with her sense of community responsibility and civic engagement. I know VJ professionally.

DB
DB is a male who works as the Executive Director of a community organization he co-founded. The agency works with incarcerated youth and their families. His sense of ‘community yesterday and today’ is what motivates him to remain directly involved in helping community members. At the time of the interview, DB was in his late 40s. He views community as his vocation. I did not know DB at the time of the interview. A local city official introduced us so that I could ask DB to participate in this study.

PD
PD is a female, college administrator. She works at a private college. When we conducted the interview, PD was in her early 50s. PD feels that community participation and civic engagement are part of what makes her who she is. She says that they are automatic responses to what she sees needs to be done and what she is asked to do. PD is a former supervisor.

PK
PK is a female who works as a consultant. She comes from a family with a tradition of community. Her parents are long-time activists. I knew her because of my professional relationship with her father. When we conducted our interview, PK was in her late 40s.

PM
PM is a female, mother and former daycare operator. PM does not actively volunteer or formally participate in her community. However, she blends her personal sense of community and responsibility in all of her relationships, regardless of the strength of those bonds. She is a friend. PM was in her mid-30s when we had the interview.

NC
NC is a male who, when interviewed, was a project manager for a school district. He retired from a high-level private sector position and felt he needed to put his skills to use in the local schools. He sees this as a way for him to help his community develop. He signed up for the project after I made a presentation at a community event. NC was in his 60s at the time of the interview.

GP
GP is a male who was working as a children’s health program administrator when he was interviewed. This was his post-retirement career. Like NC, he retired from a high-level position in the private sector and felt it was important to take the skills from his former position and put them to use for the Black community. He signed up for the project after I made a presentation at a community event. When interviewed, GP was in his late 50s.
KW
KW is a male who works as a network cameraman for one of the major television stations in the city. His dream is to produce a television show based upon the 7 principles of Kwanzaa. The objective of his television show is to present issues and concerns of importance to the Black community, while at the same time educating the viewers about community and civic responsibility. KW is a friend. At the time of our interview, he was in his early 50s.

CT
CT is a male whose life is the embodiment of community and civic engagement. He has been a community activist for more than 40 years. At the time of the interview, he was serving his first term as a city councilor. I know him through professional relationships. CT was in his early 60s when the interview was conducted.

RG
RG is a female and a lifelong community activist. She works as an Executive Director of a funding organization. Like CT, her history is about community and civic engagement. She has spent her time and energy on activities that support the growth and development of women.

During the interview, RG commented that when her daughter was younger she made the decision to expose her to community activism and instill in her a sense of community and responsibility. RG says that her daughter accompanied her to so many meetings, that when she was playing with her friends, she ‘played meeting’. A mutual friend suggested that I contact her. When we sat down for the interview, she was in her late 40s.

ROB
ROB is a male and an academic. One of his research areas is the way in which the Internet creates a social network and community. ROB comes from a family with a tradition of community. He brings to his academic and personal lives a strong sense of community and civic participation. ROB and I are former co-workers. When he was interviewed, he was in his late 30s.

MGB
MGB is a female and long-time community activist. At the time of the interview she worked as a legislative aide and was in her late 40s. MGB’s real life example of family becomes the metaphor for a definition of community. Family as community is a powerful symbol and carries with it all of the attendant expectations of responsibility and member participation. I know MGB through professional relationships.

BM
BM is a male who works as a member of the professional staff at a funding agency. His position allows him to integrate desires to support community and the primary activities of his job. BM is a former co-worker and at the time of the interview in his late 30s.
CG
CG is the youngest of the interviewees. She is a female and at the time of the interview was a college student at a private college. CG provides a generational perspective to the meaning of community and civic engagement. PD introduced me to CG. CG was 19 when she participated in this study.

LMB
LMB is a female, mother and works as an ophthalmology assistant. We conducted this interview when she was in her late 40s. LMB is active in church organizations and book clubs. She supports her friends, associates and family members in all of their activities and is engaged in community work on an informal basis. She is the mother of two college students. When her children were growing up, LMB volunteered for different school activities. She has insisted that her children volunteer and participate in community service. LMB hopes that her daughters have internalized a sense of community and commitment. LMB is a friend.

LK
LK is a male and community activist. At the time of the interview he worked as director of a housing organization and was in his late 60s. LK’s perspective is fully grounded in his work as a community activist. His community definitions and choices for civic engagement are based upon the experiences of African Americans throughout the Diaspora. LK signed up to participate in the study after he heard my presentation at a community event.

JE
JE is a male and business owner. He serves on a number of Boards of Directors and participates in and regularly donates to support community events and organizations. JE’s approach to community is humanistic. JE is a friend. When he consented to participate in this study, he was in his late 30s.

JF
JF is male and works as a lawyer and lobbyist. He has made a personal choice to invest his time and resources for the development of the African American community. I know him through my previous work for an African American research institute. JF was in his late 40s when we conducted his interview. JF helps us to understand that most of us participate in multiple communities. The extent to which we engage or invest in those communities is where we see the differences.

EH
EH is female and works as an administrative assistant at a college. She shares with us her changing perspectives on community participation and civic engagement. EH is a former co-worker. She was in her late 40s when we sat down for her interview.

LS
LS is the oldest of the interviewees. She is retired and a family member. When we conducted the interview, she was in her late 60s. Her discussion of the way people relied upon each other in the past, helps us to understand the relationship between economic necessity and
community. At the same time, she gives us an opportunity to understand how a person makes a commitment to a life of community and civic engagement. LS is my aunt and I continue to grow as I listen to her and the stories of the other interviewees in this study.