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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

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Volume 47 | Issue 4

Article 3

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2020

## Beyond the Neighborhood: Defining Membership in Diverse Community Contexts

Brad Forenza

Montclair State University, forenzab@montclair.edu

Brian Dashew

Rutgers University, brian.dashew@gmail.com

Diana Cedeño

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, diana.cedeno@siu.edu

David T. Lardier

University of New Mexico, dlardier@unm.edu

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### Recommended Citation

Forenza, Brad; Dashew, Brian; Cedeño, Diana; and Lardier, David T. (2020) "Beyond the Neighborhood: Defining Membership in Diverse Community Contexts," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 47: Iss. 4, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.4395>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol47/iss4/3>

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## Beyond the Neighborhood: Defining Membership in Diverse Community Contexts

### Cover Page Footnote

Correspondence regarding this paper may be sent to Dr. Brad Forenza (973-655-4188; forenzab@montclair.edu); Montclair State University; Department of Social Work and Child Advocacy; 372 Dickson Hall; 1 Normal Avenue; Montclair, New Jersey 07043. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

# Beyond the Neighborhood: Defining Membership in Diverse Community Contexts

Brad Forenza  
*Montclair State University*

Brian Dashew  
*Rutgers University*

Diana Cedeño  
*Southern Illinois University*

David T. Lardier  
*University of New Mexico*

*The purpose of this research is to form an overarching definition of community membership that encompasses all community contexts. Utilizing qualitative interviews with 102 members of five known community contexts (communities of action, circumstance, interest, place, and practice), the authors use cross-case analysis to explore common, transcendent themes of membership. Three takeaways emerge: first, that individuals identify with communities to address personal needs but come to see social benefits; second, that individuals join communities to deepen existing relationships, but develop new ones; and third, that through engagement, individuals strengthen a sense of self that is unique to community context. Through these takeaways, we define community as a reciprocal and emergent system of interactions through which individuals seek to address personal and shared physiological, social, and self-actualizing needs.*

*Keywords: Community, organization, membership, social capital, participatory competence*

Community membership and sense of belonging to a community is an increasingly important, and somewhat timeless, topic. When one considers the isolation brought about by modern (and necessary) social distancing policies, some may find themselves in a palpable state of anomie and disconnection. Durkheim (1951) popularized the term “anomie” in his case study of suicide, wherein typologies of suicide were defined by one’s (in)ability to socially integrate. Today, anomie can be brought about through isolation from ourselves, as well as from the collective spaces we inhabit (Way et al., 2018). In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2001) notes that lack of community membership limits social capital. While Putnam’s work has been widely critiqued for its lack of analysis rooted in social location (Inaba, 2013), its utility in describing the inherent value of community connections remains salient (Danso, 2017). Lack of social capital can be attributed to lack of civic organizations and social institutions that once provided opportunities for community membership. Community membership, in turn, has potential to fuel civic action and social change, for the betterment of individual and collective welfare. Policies that limit funding and, in turn, access to opportunities that facilitate community, cannot be maintained if the collective hopes to create synergistic ways to build consciousness and communion (Way et al., 2018).

Existing research suggests that as relational beings, “born with voice and the ability to communicate...and the desire to live in relationships” (Way et al., 2018, p. 3), we benefit from connecting with communities (Gilligan et al., 2018; Talò et al., 2014; Ward, 2018). Such benefits include, but are not limited to, overall psychological and social wellbeing, greater emotional connection to others, greater perceived security and safety (Dallago et al., 2009; Lardier et al., 2017), and more involvement in civic engagement and activism (Ginwright, 2015; Kwon, 2013; Lardier, 2018). Such participatory engagement may further actualize capacity for an entire community and promote social power (Speer, 2000). Hence, community membership may provide meaningful, purposeful, and collective hope that drives community efforts (Ginwright, 2015).

It is important for those interested in individual and collective wellbeing to understand similarities and differences associated with community participation in various contexts. Extant literature notes that communal perceptions and experiences

typically vary across context and across social location (Cedeño et al., in press); yet—in this era of collective isolation—it may be useful to probe the transcendent themes that ignite and sustain identification with community. Though Kieffer's (1984) seminal framework describes a sociopolitical developmental trajectory comprised of four stages—entry, advancement, incorporation, and commitment—there is no qualitative study that looks at these stages across different community contexts to identify global patterns or conditions of membership. In this paper, we unpack how individuals identifying with various communities (e.g., communities of action, circumstance, interest, place, and practice) describe pathways to, maintenance of, and competencies associated with Kieffer's (1984) seminal framework. The purpose of this research is to identify whether global patterns emerge across contexts, in order to develop a more universal understanding of community participation.

## Contextualizing Community and Activism

Communities are often the focal point of social science research and literature; however, a clear and concise definition of community is difficult to capture and tends to be ambiguous (Theodori, 2000). Furthermore, studies “of communities” are often studies “in communities” (Theodori, 2000, p. 35) and fail to adequately define communal experiences beyond social group or network-based definitions (e.g., “Hispanic community,” “Black community,” Theodori, 2005). Part of the difficulty in presenting a single definition of community stems from the fact that the term is popularly conceptualized as five distinct types: (a) communities of action, (b) practice, (c) place, (d) interest, and (e) circumstance (Fever Bee, n.d.). A *community of action* is one whose members share responsibility to achieve a common goal or policy change. A *community of practice* is a membership of individuals who have a similar skillset or profession and who subscribe to similar worldviews. People who share a common geographic location belong to a *community of place*. People who have a mutual avocation or hobby may elect to form a *community of interest*. On the other hand, a *community of circumstance* involves no choice; it pertains to people linked by universal experiences or situations, with the goal of mutually supporting fellow members. These types are explored in detail, below.

*Communities of Action*

A community of action is a group of individuals with the common goal of facilitating change and communal welfare via the collective power of its membership. The concept of collective power can be understood as a reciprocally recurring process to move toward understanding social and community inequality and which inspires action to create systemic change for the betterment of the collective (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). With this logic, individuals in a community of action develop an understanding for not only power operations, but also the ways in which power influences social context and relationships (Watts et al., 2011). An example of a community of action is a political party organization where, in some circumstances, members join for the benefits afforded within the group, whereas in other environments, people join political parties as a means to an end (Bob-Milliar, 2012). For instance, citizens in Ghana reported political community membership as a “survival strategy” that provided individual and social advantages (Bob-Milliar, 2012). Suffice it to say, even though we attempt to form an overarching, macro definition of community, we concede that membership can be experienced differentially at the micro and mezzo levels.

The United States is experiencing both a contradictory long-term decline, and a cross-sectional revival, in communities of action among youth. While the decline can be attributed to the perception that political participation is for “well off” or “highly educated” individuals, rather than all citizens (Sloam, 2014), the current sociological moment and groups like Black Lives Matter may illustrate an uptick in civic agency among youth (Chapman & Greenhow, 2019). Traditionally, scholars have indicated that, among youth of color, social participation may be less “formal” when compared to that of White, non-minority peers (Jagers et al., 2017). These youth may be more inclined to participate in communities of action through community service events, religious organizations, and through politically motivated cultural and artistic expression groups (e.g., social media, poetry, and music) (Ginwright, 2010; Jagers et al., 2017). Despite decline in communities of action, the existing research indicates that civic participation can be an indicator of learning (Chapman & Greenhow, 2019) and can facilitate wellbeing for others via the pursuit of social change (Forenza, 2016). This

notion illustrates the frequent intersectionality of community membership (in the case of Black Lives Matter, the intersection of communities of action and circumstance). Hence, the process of social action reinforces not only one's critical understanding of their world, but reinforces group membership and, in turn, outward social change (Watts et al., 2011).

### *Communities of Practice*

A community of practice is a group of individuals who are involved in the same activity, have common philosophies or skills, and subscribe to common education and understandings. Wenger's (2000) landmark description of "communities of practice" notably describes a structural element to a social learning system. This community is comprised of three factors: (a) joint enterprise (members contribute and have accountability both to the group and their profession); (b) mutual engagement (members interact within the collective, wherein they create group norms and establish relationships); and (c) shared repertoire (members share communal resources, such as vernacular, methods, tools, routines, etc.) (Wenger, 2000). Communities of practice are also credited with building confidence for their members, encouraging intellectual curiosity, and increasing competence (Harden & Loving, 2015). Communities of practice are centralized on the process of becoming a professional (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Professional identity is a developmental process, comprised of professional traits, collective sense of belonging, and personal experiences (Hsieh, 2016). It reveals itself over time, and—in one study of professional social workers—also can intersect with other community contexts, wherein those interviewed were also community leaders and/or shared a common formative experience (Forenza & Eckert, 2018).

### *Communities of Place*

A community of place is a group of individuals living in a common geographic location, with emphasis on local events and activities. Community of place members utilize reciprocity within the physical environment to ensure collective welfare. Research on "place attachment" has associated this type of community belongingness with less fear around social issues in

the community (Brown et al., 2004), as well as more needs fulfillment in the community (Trentelman, 2009). Individuals with great place attachment have more access to supportive social networks (Foster et al., 2017), while the opposite is also true: individuals who experience lack of attachment experience less cohesion (Hobson-Prater & Leech, 2012).

Place attachment is particularly important in locales with community-wide risks such as housing instability, mental health issues, and substance abuse (Hogg et al., 2008; Nasim et al., 2011). For instance, a study of suicide rates among African American youth found that stronger family and peer supports, as well as increased community connectedness, alleviated symptoms associated with Durkheim's (1951) conception of anomie. Specifically, community connectedness was found to be the most important protective factor for highly depressed African American youth (Matlin et al., 2011). Likewise, investigation of substance abuse in a rural African American community explained that protective factors like religion and "traditional family practice" mitigated the community disorganization that contributed to substance abuse (Nasim et al., 2011). Similarly, a recent study among vulnerable adolescents in an urban community illustrated that those youth who had access to multiple domains of connectedness (e.g., family, school, peer, community) were more likely to report lower levels of depression, suicidal ideations, non-suicidal self-injury, and associated mental health concerns, including social anxiety and low self-esteem (Foster et al., 2017). Here, again, the authors concede that membership is experienced differentially depending upon micro and mezzo locations, even though some processes are likely to transcend social location.

The characteristics of communities of place also stimulate citizen participation (Reid et al., 2017). Awareness of a community-wide problem, like substance abuse, prompts psychological empowerment and participation in group interventions, with the intention of repairing the community. Further, community members who experience high social cohesion, as well as a deep sense of commitment to their communities, are more inclined to participate in community-wide interventions (Reid et al., 2017).



*Communities of Interest*

Individuals who share a common connection characterized by passion, bonding, and group discussion form a community of interest. Volunteer groups are an example of a frequently studied community of interest because volunteerism is an essential nonprofit function for organizations (Agostinho & Paço, 2012). Due to the high value of volunteers, organizations must clearly comprehend volunteer motivations and intentions (Agostinho & Paço, 2012). For example, one survey of two volunteers at a food bank indicated motivations were socially based and altruistic; interestingly, the survey demonstrated no connection between educational level and volunteer participation (Agostinho & Paço, 2012). This last finding is significant as the results are contrary to previous research, which had suggested higher education levels correlate to more involved volunteering (Agostinho & Paço, 2012).

Communities of interest occur in realms other than volunteerism. The sociometer model explains that the desire people have for social inclusion and positive self-esteem is related to successful group inclusion and welfare (Hogg et al., 2008). Internet-based social networking sites are examples of communities of interest exemplified by the sociometer model. A study of high school student social media usage determined that interest-oriented learning (*vis-à-vis* the exploration of student hobbies) was a pervasive social media practice among participants (Bagdy et al., 2018). Herein is another illustration of the intersectionality of communities (interest and circumstance).

*Communities of Circumstance*

A community of circumstance involves a group of people who are joined by a similar situation; they focus on providing support for the common challenge. Often, the situation or challenge is “not of their making.” At present, per the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), society at large finds itself in an existential community of circumstance, regardless of political persuasion, means, or any other consideration. In addition to ethnicity, gender, and other demographic variables, one historic community of circumstance is individuals who have had adverse childhood

experiences (ACEs). Due to the multitude of research and education on ACEs, many disciplines agree that early childhood stress is directly related to impairment in future welfare, as early childhood experiences impact brain structure development in children (Boyce, 2014). Further, a Center for Disease Control study correlated adult stress related health problems with ACEs history (Bynum et al., 2011).

A related community of circumstance is contextualized by youth in the foster care system, as well as foster care alumni. One study of foster care alumni transitioning into adulthood revealed that those youth, aged 17–18, were four times more likely to experience mental health challenges but were also less likely to utilize mental health services (Havlicek et al., 2013). Another study examined the effect of changing schools on foster youth: children who switched school multiple times were academically disadvantaged and experienced more frequent behavioral problems than non-foster youth (Sullivan et al., 2010).

Communities of circumstance often benefit from positive and bonded community characteristics (Aguilar-Vafaie et al., 2011; Nemiroff et al., 2011; Pienaar et al., 2011). A questionnaire of children in foster care in Tehran, Iran discovered that community supports, such as the presence of positive role models and nurturing school environments, served as protective factors for participants (Aguilar-Vafaie et al., 2011). Similarly, another study of HIV+ orphaned children in South Africa cited external community supports as positive developmental assets: religion/faith and social values helped this population conceptualize its purpose in life (Pienaar et al., 2011), and these factors speak again to the interconnectedness of community membership. A longitudinal study of women experiencing homelessness and their psychological connections to the community revealed that access to quality housing and level of positive interaction with neighbors were associated with the women's unique circumstances, their physical places, and higher levels of community integration for those women (Nemiroff et al., 2011).

Taken together, it is clear that within each of these popular conceptions of community, members strive toward connection. The shared experiences that bring individuals together leave many members wanting to work against conditions that create and maintain anomie (Gilligan et al., 2018; Ward, 2018). As Rogers (2018) observes, the capacity to develop community

connection and membership is rooted in peoples' abilities to assess their own identities and consider ways to reconnect themselves with others in meaningful ways that allow for liberatory practices toward social change and social welfare.

This literature review demonstrates the unique nature of five distinct community conceptions. While the authors concede that membership likely varies at micro and mezzo levels, especially according to one's social location, we simultaneously strive for a unifying definition of community. Lack of a singular definition and construct has implications for both the study of community development and the services that are provided to community organizations. From a research perspective, it is difficult to envision the study of any phenomenon across communities of different types if the operationalization of community is varied and inconsistent. Though these five typologies describe different populations and purposes, it would be important to know if there are similarities that could drive the future study of community. In addition, agencies that provide grants or services to community organizations across different types may benefit from an understanding of shared qualities, in order to effectively evaluate service need or impact. This paper seeks to analyze the evolution of different communities across types, so that a shared definition of community can be offered for future research and practice purposes.

## Methods

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Cross-case synthesis is a technique used to identify patterns and to replicate findings across multiple case studies conducted with similar designs or intent (Yin, 2014). Following approval from the university's institutional review board, and in an effort to discern how communities adopt and maintain their group-based identities, this research applied a participatory competence framework to qualitative data from seven original, community-based projects conducted by the first author. Specifically, these projects were conducted in the different forms of community identified in the conceptual framework and literature review above: communities of action (a partisan political campaign, a DREAM advocacy group); communities of practice

(a professional membership association); communities of place (a supportive housing community); communities of interest (a community theater, an improvisational theater troupe for teens); and communities of circumstance (a foster youth advisory board).

While the focus of each project differed (and consequently, so did each parent questionnaire), each project made use of Kieffer's (1984) participatory competence framework and therefore contained the same set of questions pertaining to entry, advancement, and commitment. Sample questions/prompts included "How did you become involved with this community?" and "Tell me about the relationships you have formed through this community", and "Why have you stayed involved with this community?" All participants ( $N = 102$ ) were interviewed at a single point in time (cross-sectional research) and all were offered \$20 remuneration. It was made clear that the decision to participate or not would have no bearing on a participant's relationship to their focal community memberships. Demographic characteristics of the full sample are summarized in Table 1.

Per Table 1, the majority of the sample ( $n = 55$ ) identified as female and the largest percentage of participants identified as Black/African American (38.2%) or White/Caucasian (38.2%). Similarly, the majority of the sample (61.7%) identified as non-White/Caucasian. When compared to Census trends, this suggests a participant group that mostly reflects national trends (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

The first and second authors conducted independent, directed content analysis (Schreier, 2012) on the complete 102 interview transcripts. Directed content analysis utilizes existing theory (in this case, participatory competence) to generate new findings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This process began with both first and second authors immersing themselves in the raw data and identifying quotes that supported three of Kieffer's (1984) well-documented participatory competence dimensions: entry, advancement, and commitment. After engaging with the data iteratively, the authors met to discuss which examples could best extend Kieffer's (1984) seminal framework, while simultaneously helping to contextualize myriad community processes. Over the course of analysis, trustworthiness was of the utmost concern. The authors grounded their interpretation in extant literature on community context. Second, findings were reviewed

Table 1. Demographics (N = 102)

Variables	Communities of Action			Circumstance			Interest			Place			Practice			TOTAL	
	Partisan Volunteers	DREAM Activists		Foster Youth			Community Theater	Improv Troupe		Supportive Housing			Professional Association			N	%
Participants	13	5	4.9	14	13.7		14	13.7	10	9.8	34	33.3	12	11.8	102	100.0	
Gender																	
Male	5	4	3.9	4	3.9		6	5.9	4	3.9	21	20.6	3	2.9	47	46.1	
Female	8	1	1.0	10	9.8		8	7.8	6	5.8	13	12.7	9	8.8	55	53.9	
Race/Ethnicity																	
Black/African American	2	2.0	--	10	9.8		--	--	--	--	23	22.5	4	3.9	39	38.2	
White/Caucasian	4	3.9	--	--	--		14	13.7	9	8.8	5	4.9	7	6.7	39	38.2	
Hispanic/Latinx	7	6.9	4.9	1	1.0		--	--	1	1.0	4	3.9	--	--	18	17.6	
Interracial	--	--	--	2	2.0		--	--	0	--	2	2.0	--	--	4	3.9	
Other	--	--	--	1	1.0		--	--	0	--	--	--	1	1.0	2	2.0	

independently, by all authors of the study, each of whom has extant experience with diverse types of communities and vulnerable populations.

## Limitations

While findings presented here offer a palpable understanding of participatory competence across community contexts, the authors concede that data were procured via seven different samples at seven distinct times. While all participants ( $N = 102$ ) were asked questions about entry, advancement, and commitment, the scope of each parent project (and questionnaire) was different. As such, participants may not have been oriented to explicitly discuss entry, advancement, and commitment within their focal communities. Further, Kieffer's (1984) fourth explicated dimension—incorporation—is unexplored here, because the authors determined that “incorporation” involved choice in one's membership, which was not true for the community of circumstance (foster youth) represented in this study. Similarly, we have conceded all along that experiences of membership likely vary at the micro and mezzo levels; nevertheless, we did not conduct analyses rooted in race, gender, or other demographic attributes, as we perceived our sample to be more or less reflective of national demographic trends. Future research should dissect this (or similar) data according to those aforementioned variables to discern the extent to which communal experiences are conflicted when analyzed according to race, gender, etc.

## Results

The existing data was categorized according to Kieffer's (1984) seminal participatory competence framework (e.g., as examples of entry, advancement, or commitment). Within these dimensions, patterns were sought that could demonstrate qualities of community development within the five previously mentioned typologies: (a) communities of action (partisan campaign volunteers and DREAM activists); (b) practice (a professional membership organization for social workers); (c) circumstance (foster youth); (d) place (supportive housing consumers); and (e) interest (community theater members and a teen improvisational theater troupe).

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*Entry*

A shared point of entry across communities was a *desire to address personal concern*. Though communities of action (partisan campaign volunteers, a local DREAM initiative) were eventually determined to be more concerned with collective, societal welfare, engagement with the campaign community was more often precipitated by the pursuit of a positive individual outcome. This personal rationale was especially clear among DREAM activists (one of the communities of action). As several DREAM activists noted, positive personal outcomes hung in the balance of pursuing change for all in that target community (e.g., “I began to get involved for personal reasons. I faced struggles with the immigration system”; “I had received a scholarship [to college], but had to give it back because of my status”; “Being undocumented was holding me back from pursuing my education”). According to one DREAM leader,

I wasn't able to go to the school I wanted to because of my [citizenship] status. I got into all the schools I applied to, including [a prestigious university], but I couldn't go. I went to [another university] and was able to get some scholarships... but my parents and I were out of money. I had to either take one year off or become a part-time student...After that, my story became public and the media began to contact me. In 2009, I went to [the state capitol] to testify at a hearing. I met three other undocumented students there. Even though the bill was not passed, we kept in touch and a couple of months later, we founded the [statewide] DREAM Act coalition.

Evidence of engagement in order to achieve an individual outcome was seen within each community type. Other members of other community types joined their respective communities in order to have a positive impact on their lives or on a population that had a shared experience. For these individuals, entry was the result of a sense that their *personal experiences were reflected in community membership* (e.g., “[my DREAM involvement] gives [younger kids] an opportunity to get a status like I did. I was once in a similar situation”). This collective obligation was often framed as a sense of personal responsibility (e.g., “I became active because the minority community *needed* a voice”). As one of the partisan campaign volunteers said,



When I was 16, I joined a chapter of a political group at my high school. Even though I knew that I couldn't vote, it was my responsibility to promote the values that I believed in as best as I could.

Though entry was frequently the result of a personal need or responsibility, the commitment stage was often an opportunity to see positive outcomes reflected externally, for society at large. Evidence of community as a force for positive outcomes was seen across all typologies. "I've learned to be more helpful," said a participant in the foster youth community (a community of circumstance). "I've learned how to step up. I feel proud, helpful, honored, and respected," they noted. A participant in the teen improvisational theater group (a community of interest) said, "I had a meaning and a place in society. I was helping kids." One community theatre participant (the other community of interest) suggested these social benefits were a main reason for continued membership, which—in turn—had implications for conveying a broader human experience: "I feel responsible for [maintaining membership]...I think I continue to be engaged in theater now because the telling of stories is super important to the human experience. Creating art makes me a more emotionally intelligent person."

The quote above suggests that individuals across community types approach these contexts in order to address personal needs, but that one of the results of continued engagement is an interest in leveraging the strengths of the community for *increased social benefit*.

### *Advancement*

From the perspective of entry, individuals across the cases viewed community involvement as an *extension of existing relationships*. Among participants in communities of action, for example, seven of the 18 individuals interviewed referenced family in their response to reasons for entry. Though family was not the prevailing relationship that was recalled among the community of circumstance (15 foster youth), five joined because of an existing relationship with a support coordinator (e.g., "The coordinator caught sight of me having a visit. He knew I was frustrated with [the state child welfare agency] and my



biological father, so he invited me to come to a meeting. I was hooked.”), four joined because of a relationship with another youth in care who was attending the program, and five joined as an extension of another support program of which they were already a member. The final youth joined to meet a service requirement. The extension of existing community was a driver in entry for all community types studied.

However, *relationship focus moved internally through time*. Participants across typologies were more likely to discuss the relationships that developed within community groups as opposed to the impact of the community on their initial relationships (e.g., “My relationship with [other community members] is: they drive me crazy, but I love them more than anything.”). What is unique is that the core activity of the community type drove the focus of relationships developed in the advancement stage. For example, one community theater participant noted,

I’ve had relationships in community theatre—boyfriends. The mutual attraction of the love of the activity, that is very time consuming and rewarding, makes someone in community theater more attractive...People in the theater will understand you and be more willing to help in any situation.

In other words, the relationship within that community is precipitated by and centered on collective values. This can be contrasted with the statement of a participant in a community of place (supportive housing). Per the comment below, place-based relationship development is precipitated by and centered on shared physical space.

We wake up together, we eat together, we cook together...if I’m cooking, I always offer food to others. You can wake up grumpy, but your neighbors can make you feel amazing just by cracking jokes. We’ll sit there and crack jokes—we rap, we box, we play basketball outside...anything that connects us and gets us to enjoy the day and the moment.

Though there was consistency in relationship development at the entry and advancement stages, the impact of relationships on individuals across community types was not consistent. For participants in the foster youth study, relationships served a familial need that had not previously been met (e.g.,

“[foster youth advisory board] gave me a family that I didn’t have growing up”), while individuals in the supportive housing program spoke about independence—not relationships—as a positive outcome of their membership (e.g., “I have the ability to do things that I didn’t get to do on the street. I have the freedom to do what I want, when I want. I also have a heater, which is the most amazing thing ever”).

Those within communities of action (both partisan campaign participants and DREAM activists) saw themselves as a bridge between those within the community organization and those the community served, which was frequently the same audience that led to their involvement in the first place. While little consistency was seen across community types, the differences may be related to the contextual and motivational factors that drove entry into the communities in the first place. In other words, the relationships built were both purposive and personally meaningful.

### *Commitment*

As involvement within the communities developed, participants began identifying *affinity for fellow group members*. As one partisan campaign member noted, “[The relationships with other volunteers] start professional, and often become friendly...And when you don’t [become friends], your relationship stays professional. You continuously work together [for a collective good].” This sentiment was echoed by a community theater participant: “When you graduate from high school or college, you tend to stop making real friends. For me, that changed when I started getting involved with community theater, and doing shows for my community.” As one of the foster youth (community of circumstance) said of her peers, “We have a relationship because we’re all from similar backgrounds. We have a common experience to relate to, and that helps us come together.”

One supplement to this theme is the participation by members of the DREAM movement (one of two communities of action studied). Rather than affinity based on communal experiences, these members identified affinity from shared circumstance. “We connected on our cultural identity,” said one activist. “Being undocumented is a culture of its own because

you are affected by what your parents and politicians say about you and to you.”

Regardless of purpose, these communal support structures enabled participants first to see themselves reflected in a community and—ultimately—to *leverage self-reflection into a deeper sense of self*. At the commitment stage, nearly all participants from each of the five community types made reference to deepening self-confidence and self-awareness. When one of the foster youth was asked to describe his feelings as a member of the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) leadership, he said, “YAB has saved me from the streets, has helped me identify my career choice, YAB is like...it’s the support system I needed for a really long time.” As is the case with the support systems that lead to this sense of self, the “self” was often described in terms of the community type that led to its emergence. Therefore, the community of practice led to an increased sense of professional identity (e.g., “People can tell that I’m a helper”), while the community of action led to an increased sense of self as activist, as in the quote below:

When you are out advocating for DREAMers, you see, you are fearless. Just holding a poster or signing a petition you are putting yourself out there...I [used to] lie to my peers and councilors about my status because I was fearful.

This demonstrates that communities serve a reciprocal function that can lead to *self-actualization*. This final theme also reinforces the importance of relationships in the context of community participation, as a facilitator of individual-level benefit.

## Discussion

### *Summary*

An exploration of five different community types revealed eight major themes related to the development of communities across contexts. Regarding one’s *entry* into a community, participants in this study disclosed a *desire to address personal concern* (e.g., citizenship). Additionally, participants indicated a belief that their *personal experiences were reflected in community membership*. This belief was perceived to yield an *increased social*

*benefit* for the participant. The *advancement* stage was best illustrated by community-based identity being first perceived as an *extension of existing relationships*; however, the *relationship focus moved internally through time* for participants in this study. With respect to *commitment* to the community, participants recalled an *affinity for fellow group members*. Participants were also able to *leverage self-reflection into a deeper sense of self*, as that reflection related to their membership. Finally, membership had potential to help participants achieve *self-actualization*. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Findings

Stage Participatory Competence	Emergent Themes
Entry	Desire to address personal concern Personal experiences were reflected in community membership Increased social benefit
Advancement	Extension of existing relationships Relationship focus moved internally through time
Commitment	Affinity for fellow group members Leverage self-reflection into a deeper sense of self Self-actualization

Findings yield three pervasive takeaways: first, that individuals approach communities to address personal needs but come to see social benefit through continued commitment to the community; second, that individuals join communities to deepen existing relationships but develop new purposive and meaningful relationships that address specific community concerns; and third, that through engagement in community, individuals strengthen a sense of self that is expressed in ways that are unique to community type. We therefore suggest that a possible definition for community is a reciprocal and emergent system of interactions through which individuals seek to address personal and shared physiological, social, and self-actualizing needs. Such a definition can be leveraged in research and practice contexts.

Community membership is an important discussion in not only the pursuit of our common humanity, but in developing greater emotional connection, security, and safety, as well as in cultivating action to change the ways in which

socioenvironmental forces function. This, in turn, has implications for the welfare of communities and society at large. Membership in a group means that individuals may be more willing to forgo individual gains to enhance collective good and to engage in the kind of action that is most meaningful to the group and community (Ginwright, 2015). Furthermore, membership in a community may empower individuals to take part in activism, participate in civic engagement, and promote social power (Forenza & Germak, 2015). This conceptualization of political action resists trends toward individualism and action as an individual practice and moves toward action as a community-based social practice (Kwon, 2013).

In this qualitative exploratory study, we traced Kieffer's (1984) concepts of entry, advancement, and commitment in the context of five distinct community types. Participants identified a lifelong process of community engagement that requires working with others with the mindset of acting towards social change. Aligned with Kieffer's seminal framework, members of these diverse community typologies described a sense of empowerment by being engaged and dedicated to their causes, in some cases because of their group-based solidarity/confidence or because their communities helped them to achieve individual and collective goals (e.g., develop their professional skills or achieve social change, respectively). Moreover, participants explained their membership as a long-term process. Participants felt empowered during the commitment stage because they had the support of a community that shaped their identities, their sense of purpose, and their welfare.

For participants in this study, entry, advancement, and commitment to community was a process whereby they developed critical awareness, created important relationships with other members, and gained confidence and new skills despite potentially difficult life circumstances. Members defined communities as outlets to understand themselves, to improve lives, and to pursue common goals. Participants discussed communities as spaces to feel empowered and help others with similar backgrounds and life experiences. Kieffer's (1984) participatory competence framework allowed us to understand how members from different communities viewed their collective development. Members from all communities echoed the idea of progress as they expressed their commitment and desire to move forward with

their acquired knowledge, skills, peers, and mentors who shared goals, purpose, passions, dreams, and collective inclinations. This finding reflects the role of membership in the capacity to instill both commitment to the community and activism in community change. Findings from this study also highlight the importance of membership in achieving specific goals, developing a perceived sense of control over one's future, and experiencing a sense of engagement in society (Ginwright, 2015).

### *Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research*

The development of community membership is an important area of consideration for policymakers and practitioners alike, particularly those engaged in improving communities and mobilizing members toward social change. Much of the status quo of community-based research and work carried out in the United States has not necessarily been beneficial to communities. The work of rescuing and "saving" communities from harm not only depletes the human spirit but articulates to the community that they have no assets or resources to cultivate social change. Recently, scholars have called for a rejection of this type of work. Instead they have suggested movement toward liberation-based strategies that promote the development of membership and the development of a critical understanding, as well as analysis of, social contexts to promote community transformations that those in the community envision for themselves. This type of work may mean restructuring how we understand engagement and change and re-centering this work on collective identity and action, wherein community members act to achieve goals that allow them to have greater control over their welfare at both the micro and macro levels.

Ginwright (2015) calls for a "turning inwards" to make sense of the structural conditions that create and maintain oppression, as well as turning "outwards" toward activism and change (p. 145). In order to cultivate membership and outward change, community members and leaders need to consider ways in which to turn "inwards" and form bonds in their communities to not only restore hope and dignity, but also help develop meaning and advance social change (Ginwright, 2015). Members must assess their own identities and question how they are "outwardly" resisting anomie and connecting with others

around them (Rogers, 2018). Through this process, they may be able to reconnect and develop membership in a community and become critically aware of power and ways to rupture and change hierarchical structures of inequality (Luque-Ribelles & Portillo, 2009).

The authors suggest that not only should community members and leaders focus on ways to create and sustain membership, but that policymakers should provide funding that supports such work. This prevention-oriented policymaking is evidenced in strengths-based initiatives like the Foster Care Independence Act (1999), which indirectly popularized foster youth advisory boards like the one profiled in this study, and the modern housing first movement, which emphasizes pro-social relationships among consumers of supportive housing (Temple University Collaborative, 2011). Shifting power back to the community means creating non tokenizing roles where all community members have the opportunity to participate in decision-making and transformative change for their community. This may mean continuing to turn “inwards” and address issues of power, inequality, and community practices that create and maintain a hierarchy and, in turn, maintain disconnection or lack of membership. Nonetheless, policymakers and community members and leaders who are able to take on the task of shifting how they engage and support their community will allow for the creation of a more supportive, cohesive, democratic and politically active community in all contexts.

Future research should continue to probe for how individuals develop an understanding of each community, form membership in these communities, and move along the path of community participation. Additionally, future studies will benefit from engaging other groups of individuals (e.g., Queer Community, prison community, substance abuse recovery community) to consider how they understand community membership and the ways in which they engage or do not engage in social activism. In addition, future research should retain the qualitative components of this formative study, as qualitative research can offer a descriptive understanding of membership and participatory competence within and among groups of individuals across social location.



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