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Community as Story and the Dynamic Nature of Community: Perceptions, Place, and Narratives about Change

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Abstract: We present a theoretical discussion conceptualizing “community as story”—narratives that create and recreate one’s definition of and relationship to their community. We use a variety of disciplinary sources and representative quotes to help develop the theory. In so doing, we discuss the importance of subjective perception, narrative and place to the creation of a community story. Community stories take place in time and place, and as changes to the place occur, residents are compelled to adjust their stories and definitions. These changes are reflected in narratives that reminisce about what the community was and what it is becoming. The narratives then become part of a new community story. Above and beyond our theoretical conceptualization of “community as story”, to help illustrate our arguments in an empirical setting, we present a historical narrative from interviews with residents of Vance, Alabama, home of the Mercedes-Benz plant, which discuss the changing nature of and relationship to their community after the arrival of the plant in the 1990s.

Keywords: community; collective behavior; social change

1. Introduction

“Trying to study community is like trying to scoop jello [*sic*] up with your fingers. You can get hold of some, but there’s always more slipping away from you” (Pelly-Effrat 1974, p. 1). In this paper, we dip into the proverbial “community” Jell-O to offer a theoretical exploration of “community as story”. Community as story refers to the narratives and meta-narratives residents create about their community and changes in them. Our approach to community as story is interdisciplinary, since we cite the works not only of sociologists, but also of artists, theologians, anthropologists, political scientists, historians, novelists, philosophers, and geographers.

We begin by reviewing the dynamic processes through which residents—individually and collectively—come to envision their community. Next, we address how shared, idealized conceptualizations of community influence the interpretation and navigation of the residents’ world. To better understand how stories establish community identity, we then focus on scholarship attuned to understanding the relationship between emotional attachments and the place where community happens. We further examine how social impacts often necessitate a subjective redefining of community.

In the final section, we provide an example of community as story by highlighting a historical case study of residents’ narratives of Vance, Alabama, home to a Mercedes-Benz factory. Building the factory in Vance influenced shifts in the individual community stories and an emerging meta-community

narrative. We intentionally call upon a historical case study because, as was articulated by Chapman (1979, p. 46), “the past is at its best when it takes us to places that counsel and instruct, that show us who we are by showing us where we have been, that remind us of our connections to *what happened here*” (original emphasis). Furthermore, by studying community stories, we do not discount other theories of community or the more objectifiable aspects of it. Instead, our purpose is to draw attention to some aspects of community that often “slip through the fingers” of community scholarship by expounding on the theory of community as story.

2. Community as Story: A Nexus of Individual and Collective Narratives

Community as story includes both a personal and a collective nexus of local economic, social/cultural, historical and individual factors. Dynamic, synergistic communities (Kenyon 2000; Crow and Allen 1994) must be conceptualized using more than economic and demographic characteristics. Communities are places where, and when, community happens for people (Brown et al. 1998), and community happens in large part through people’s narratives—that is, their stories (Flynn 1991; see also Hinchman and Hinchman 1997). As Flynn says, “Personal stories blend into (and) are chapters within community stories” (Flynn 1991, p. 25). It is “in large part through shared stories that communities create themselves and bind themselves together” (Card 1990, p. 273).

2.1. Community Story Shapes an Individual’s Stories

All stories are composed by human actors and their ability to conceptualize and author their life story is limited by the setting (or community) of which they are a part. MacIntyre (1997, pp. 251, 253) maintains:

What the agent is able to do and say intelligibly as an actor is deeply affected by the fact that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please . . . We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making . . . it is always the case that there are constraints on how the story can continue and that within those constraints there are indefinitely many ways that it can continue.

Community as story, then, is portrayed through the observed or imagined relations between specific actors who occupy a particular place in time and the inherited stories of that place (Phillips 2002; Calhoun 1991). Zerubavel (1999, p. 7) asserts, “I experience the world not only personally, through my own senses, but also *impersonally*, through my mental membership in various social communities” (emphasis in original). Thus, we as individuals are in some ways constrained or conditioned by our community’s narrative. Nevertheless, we have the power, along with our fellow actors, to reshape and redefine that narrative.

Individual stories and community stories can be intertwined, play off each other, or be at odds with each other. Individuals constantly shape, adjust and reconcile discordant elements of their personal community stories with an emergent community story. “A community’s stories offer members a set of canonical symbols, plots, and characters through which they can interpret reality and negotiate—or even create—their world” (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997, p. 235). Thus, community is always to some degree “imposed” because each individual must reconcile her story of community with all others in that place and time to create *the* community’s story. Dewey (1916, p. 24) believed that community comes into being through a “process of sharing experience until it becomes a common possession. It modifies the disposition of both parties who partake in it”. Consequently, our individual community stories, as Hummon (1990) explains, will be further modified by the “type” of community we live in: rural, urban or suburban. For this reason, making “sense of reality and [our] place in the everyday world” (p. 6) is largely predicated on our type and ideals of community, the sense of place it engenders, and our attachments to those places that embody that ideal (see Beckley 2003). Flynn (1991, p. 25) captures this idea well: “To the extent that communities lack story, they lack a sense of community,

of solidarity . . . If people do not perceive that they are helping to move the story along, then there is less community, less community-as-story". The constraints of those ideas will be played out in our community stories, which are shaped by our history: "The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past" (MacIntyre 1997, p. 159). Thus, "while we certainly think both as individuals and as human beings, what goes on inside our heads is also affected by the particular *thought communities* to which we happen to belong" (Zerubavel 1999, p. 9; emphasis in original). This does not mean that every individual must "buy into" the larger story. Even if an individual's community story remains discordant with the larger story, (s)he still knows the larger story—what members of the community say it is (or should be).

2.2. Creation and Maintenance of Community Boundaries

Individuals who compose community impose criteria on those who belong in it. They define the criteria through the creation of boundaries that are physical, political, linguistic, ethnic or racial. It is the individuals who *assert* the boundaries of the imagined community, although powerful outsiders may *assign* a different boundary (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Such boundaries inevitably include individuals who may or may not share a common imagination of these boundaries. The interaction of these collective community identity processes varies over time and place, and results in changing community boundaries.

As the community story boundaries develop through the individual's collective stories, those individuals, in turn, must redefine their personal stories of community to accommodate the larger perceived group view of the larger perceived group—their *community*. Consequently, Hummon (1990, p. 9) asserts that "people's attitudes toward community are seldom unique, nor are they universally known. Rather, their views tend to be patterned, shared with others with whom they live and communicate; different from others who lie outside the boundaries of common culture and experience". Similarly, Card (1990) says that:

No human community could ever exist if we had no mechanism to enable us to feel safe in trusting other people's behavior to follow certain predictable patterns. And these predictable patterns can't arise solely from personal experience—we must know, with some certainty, before we have observed another member of the community for any length of time, what he or she is likely to do in most situations . . . Each community has its own epic: a complex of stories about what it means to be a member of that community . . . All storytelling contains elements of the particular, the epic, and the mythic (pp. 273–274).

MacIntyre (1997) conception similarly emphasizes that our shared views or meta-story of community are *always* a compromise with the potential multiplicity of views of other individuals who also seek to envision community:

It is because we all live out narratives in our lives, and because we understand our own lives in terms of narratives that we live out, that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others. Stories are lived before they are told (p. 249).

2.3. Ideals Shape Stories

Many individuals and communities share common components of their stories because their interpretations of the world lead them to feel that communities must meet certain standards. As such, as was observed by Hill (1991), the "quest for community is a quest for a particular kind of community to include particular people. The worth of a particular quest for community cannot be separated from the consequences of sustaining one community at the expense of another." That is, community stories promote common ideals about "the good life" (Bell and Newby 1972) or the way things *should* be. As Hummon (1990, p. 6) says, "Community beliefs, I propose, are best understood as interpretive, socially-shared perspectives, learned from community ideology and socially-structured experience".

For example, a common element in most contemporary community stories is an ideal of “the good life”, but this is a modern twist to the community as story.

The belief that stable and tightly-knit communities have existed in the past and still survive in distant lands is an important myth for industrial and highly mobile societies. It is therefore no coincidence that it was in the turmoil of late nineteenth-century industrialization that the idea of “community” as opposed to modern “society” was developed extensively, particularly in the work of Tönnies (Macfarlane et al. 2008, p. 1).

Contemporary Americans, in particular, draw heavily on a highly idealized interpretation of what community has been, by formulating an idea of what it should be (Rutman and Rutman 1984). Thus, today, community often represents, as Abrams (1971, pp. 59–60) suggests:

... that mythical state of social wholeness in which each member has his place and in which life is regulated by cooperation rather than by competition. It ... always seems to be in decline at any given historical present. Thus, community is that which each generation feels it must rediscover and re-create.

Because we seek to blend our individual stories into the story of our communities, our concept of community acts as a guidepost for our relations with others for conceptualizing others in the community, which contributes to the overall characteristics of the community story.

3. Community as Story: A Mythic and Imagined Structure

Community as both a personal and shared ideal, or community as story, might best be represented as a “mythic structure”, a concept described by Peterson (1990, p. 9):

Myths express the collective mentality of any given age and provide patterns for human action ... Since the human relationship with myth is based on use rather than truth or falsity, myth provides the most appropriate instrument for the necessary inversion of ideological contradictions ... Myth’s flexibility allows its users to correct dysfunctional orientations without worrying about contradictions, logical or otherwise. Myths that lose the flexibility become dysfunctional.

Card (1990) similarly says that the “truth” of stories is not predicated on their close association to empirical facts, but on how effectively they reveal truths about humanity in general. The dynamic and highly flexible mythic structure applies to community stories, which describe overarching “truths” of the community while withstanding contradictions. This understanding of community is corroborated by Macfarlane et al. (2008) who argue that community is a “powerful myth” in industrial societies.

Although our stories of community are adaptable and accommodating with regard to the ambiguity within the ‘factual’ empirical world, they may become dysfunctional when their flexibility is challenged to such an extent that they can no longer account for overt inconsistencies. In other words, in such cases, a severe cognitive dissonance is created, which we strive to resolve by redefining who and what constitutes our community and our relationship to it. Essentially, we must revise our story. On an individual level, this can occur as the result of a life-altering epiphany, the end of a long absence from a place or a group, a life-cycle change, and so forth. On a larger level, it is often prompted by a singular event—a natural disaster, for example (see Erikson 1976), by a short-term, yet large-scale “mega-event”, such as the Olympics (see Cope et al. 2015), by a large economic development that dwarfs all other entities in the community (see Brown et al. 1989), or by processes of industrialization and suburbanization (see Salamon 2003). Under these circumstances, what ultimately remains firmly in our control is our ability to define and redefine our community, our story.

4. Community as Story: The Place and the Imagined Community

To fully understand how community stories or myths develop and change, we must understand the significance of place in their creation. As Flynn (1991, p. 24) argues, “Stories take place somewhere

... and community must occur some-place". Because our ideal of who and what constitutes our community is generally tied to a specific place, our emotional attachments to the place—our *sense* of place—become part of our story. It is *where* our community happens. Alterations in the place, therefore, can force us to redefine *how* our community happens *there*. As Gieryn (2000, p. 465) maintains:

In spite of its relatively enduring and imposing materiality, the meaning or value of the same place is labile—flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably constructed . . . Place is not space—which is more properly conceived as abstract geometries . . . Space is what place becomes when the unique gatherings of things, meanings, and values are sucked out . . . Put positively, place is space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations.

This view echoes Gussow's earlier assertion (Gussow 1971, p. 27) that place is "a piece of the whole environment which has been claimed by feelings". The emotion-laden sense of place experienced by individuals in a place contributes to the unique construction of the community narrative there. As Lewis (1979, p. 41; emphasis in original) asserts: "All these places, no matter what else they have, have a *sense of shared experience*. And, very often, that experience is NOT shared by other folk who do not inhabit that particular place". In other words, "This is *where*, for me, community happens".

All imagined community occupies place—even if the place is "virtual"—and community is what gives place its meaning. Place and community become common components of each other, not because community must physically occupy some place in time, but because the individuals who imagine community must do so. According to Tuan (1977, p. 12), place and community—which happens in it—become mutual objects of value: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value . . . What can be known is a reality that is a construct of experience, a creation of feeling and thought" (Tuan 1977, pp. 6, 9).

Places take on value as community when they are "personed", becoming imbued with the "sense of the presence of those who are not physically there" (Bell 1997, p. 113). When we imagine who belongs to our community, we also imagine who belongs to the place where our community occurs. Bell (1997, p. 113) argues that, "The meaning of a place, its *genius loci*, depends upon the geniuses we locate there". So, my imagined community is closely tied to my perception of place and to those who do and do not fit in it. Indeed, the value of my place, my community, can be altered if I feel others who "do not fit" encroach upon it.

Together with having a conception of the people who make up and belong in a place, the name of our place, which grasps what a community represents for us, is of equal importance. Tuan (1977, p. 29) maintains that:

Things are not quite real until they acquire names and can be classified in some way. Curiosity about places is part of a general curiosity about things, part of the need to label experiences so that they have a greater degree of permanence and fit into some conceptual scheme.

Place names become part of our individual stories. "Our place" or "my place" has a name if only at an individual level, where "my place" is associated with certain events or experiences. More generally, if many people share a common name for a place, they may also share much of a common story about that place.

The common stories that develop through the "personing" and "naming" of places are sometimes referred to as "heritage narratives", which are selective understandings of the history and character of a place, largely shaped through social interaction (Alkon 2004; Carmichael and McDonough 2019). According to Gieryn (2000, p. 467), "Place saturates social life: it is one medium (along with historical time) through which social life happens . . . Places are made through human practices and institutions even as they help make those practices and institutions". Place, thus, mediates social life.

Place and community, then—made up of a name, people, and values—are tied up with community identity and community story. Residents "have a sense of place, shaped by a shared history and a

shared culture derived from continuity of generations” (Salamon 2003, p. 3). Mealor (1979, p. 189) describes the process of creating community identity as follows:

We are all essentially terrestrial creatures identified with a particular town or area. No matter where we travel or what we do, there is in the back of our minds a place we call home. We may have several “homes”, each identified in time and space with other human beings and with important events. Unlike our forefathers, our spatial identity can change more easily as a result of education, travel, and occupation. Even though the mobility that is ours in the last one-third of the twentieth century enables us to develop identity with new places, we can and do identify through memories with those previous places that were “home”. Our mind usually reflects upon those places through eyes that recall landscapes and people as they were, not as they are today.

Basso similarly comments on the construction of place and especially the influence our socially-attuned imaginations have on personal and community identities.

Place-making . . . is a common response to common curiosities—what happened here? . . . What people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the earth . . . If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of *doing* human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities. *We are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine (Basso 1996, pp. 5, 7; emphasis in original).

Even if we no longer affiliate ourselves with a certain place, we still look for something to which we can attach our identity of self and of others. Thus, Salman Rushdie (1991, pp. 124–125), speaking of the highly mobile nature of people in modern society, asserted:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being—“mass migrants”—who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves . . . Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats.

Although many of us are not migrants—at least in the normative sense—sometimes we must still “make a new imaginative relationship with the world because of the loss of familiar habitats” when our community or our perception of it changes dramatically. As the place to which we are connected changes, we adjust our community story accordingly. This usually occurs through small, sometimes imperceptible shifts. For many, the places of reference will never change dramatically enough to challenge the fundamental definition of community associated with it. Few of us are compelled to rewrite our community story entirely. Some may feel so compelled in cases where they experience singular life-changing events in their communities, but when this occurs, how can they reconceptualize the story of the place they once knew as non-traditional “migrants”? How do they reconcile their view of community in light of another’s?

Hirschman (1970) argues that we always have three options for dealing with imposed conditions: “exit”, “voice”, and “loyalty”. “Exit is the act of simply leaving . . . [It] is essentially a *private* and also typically a silent decision and activity” (Hirschman 1995, pp. 12, 34). A person may choose to “exit” the conditions if she finds she is unable to reconcile them with her own views. This can be done physically—by literally leaving or moving, or symbolically by removing oneself from the procedures that legitimate the conditions (e.g., refusing to vote). In essence, she has attempted to withdraw part of her story from the larger community’s. A second option is “voice”, “the act of complaining, or of organizing to complain, or of protesting, with the intention of achieving a direct recuperation of

the quality that has been impaired . . . [It] is typically a *public* activity” (Hirschman 1995, pp. 12, 34). People can try to express their opinions to the larger community in an attempt to make *their* voice *the* voice of the community. Voice is the act of trying to redefine the community’s story. Lastly, a person can simply be “loyal” to the existing conditions.

When new conditions arise in a community that compel people to redefine their community stories, individuals will seek to redefine the story with a method that is most satisfying for them. Because people share commonalities in their definitions of community (Hummon 1990), individual satisfaction for some (if not the majority) of the community members will likely see some type of group solution versus an individualistic one. Consequently, people will likely respond to new conditions through *voice* or *loyalty* rather than through *exit*, seeking to revise the community’s story as they revise their own. Regardless of the approach they take—exit, voice, or loyalty—each member of the affected community will have to redefine his position from prior conditions to accommodate the new conditions. Understanding how community is redefined through its members—the rewriting of the community story—is the basis of community impacts.

5. Social Impacts: The Rewriting of the Community Story

Community impacts precipitated by a singular event can be viewed as the consequences of people transitioning from one perceived community to another in the same location. Yet in this transition, the definitions of both the place and the community change to accommodate the event creating the impact, for it is now part of a “new” community that occupies the same place as the old one. From this point on, community—*this* community—can only be understood when the event, or thing, is considered a part of it. It is now part of the local context and the narratives associated with it. The place has changed to accommodate it; so too have the definitions of community which happen in that place. Finsterbusch (1980, p. 23) states that “generally, impacts on individuals are best monitored within a quality-of-life framework which includes both descriptions of measurable changes in a person’s objective conditions and subjective responses to these changes”. The changes in objective conditions may even be imposed externally, but the subjective responses to them are not. What lies within the control of community members is their subjective redefining of their community. Abrams (1982, p. 8) notes that, “. . . what people do in the present [is] a struggle to create a future *out of* the past, of seeing that the past is not just the womb of the present but the only material out of which the present can be constructed”. Regardless of the reason for the community’s new conditions, these conditions become the “raw material” for people to redefine their stories. As people are compelled to reconcile new conditions with their imagined communities, they are also compelled to imagine their community in new ways, to rewrite the community’s story as they rewrite their own. Thus, the impacts take shape in, and are indicated by, the modification of the narratives of the residents about their community. We will illustrate how these ideas play out in communities by introducing a historical case study. This historical case study elucidates how the narratives of the residents of Vance, Alabama, changed with the building of the Mercedes-Benz plant in their community.

6. Shifts in Individual Community Stories: Vance, Alabama, and the Mercedes Benz Plant

On 30 September 1993, Mercedes-Benz announced the site for its first U.S. factory—Vance, Alabama, population 300. The \$540 million, 1500 employee, high-tech facility began producing over 60,000 sports utility vehicles per year in February 1997. [1] See Hudspeth (1995) for particulars about the “winning” of the Mercedes plant in Vance. News articles published in *The Tuscaloosa News (TTN)* between 10 October 1993 and 7 December 1994 report the following details of the Mercedes-Benz deal:

The State of Alabama offered a lucrative incentive package to Mercedes-Benz that was estimated at four times the amount that other states offered. The original agreement included a pledge by the Tuscaloosa City Council to spend \$30 million to buy and develop the plant site. Once the 966-acre tract was cleared, leveled and prepared for construction, the entire 966 acres was to be sold to Mercedes for \$100.00. The Alabama legislature also set up a plan

to allow Mercedes to keep five percent of its workers' wages to pay off construction debts (the workers would get a matching tax break) and approved a twenty-five-year corporate tax holiday for the company. The state also was to pay the workers while they trained. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs approved a grant application dated December 1993 for estimated state funded improvements to the site and surrounding area totaling \$426.3 million, which breaks down as follows: site acquisition, \$5.3 million; site preparation, \$12.4 million; site improvement, \$10.0 million; water and sewer \$11.0 million; railroad extension, \$4.0 million; job training facility, \$30.0 million; service center building, \$5.0 million; fire station, \$0.6 million; interstate interchange and access roads, \$50.0 million; plant facility, equipment and other expenses, \$300 million.

Although construction began on schedule, a key event transpired early in the construction schedule when the City of Tuscaloosa annexed a previously unincorporated 14-mile corridor of highway to the plant and placed a "City of Tuscaloosa" water tower at the plant site facing the town of Vance. Regarding this event, the mayor of Vance said: "That's something the citizens of Vance resent—having a company come in and all of a sudden rename your community . . . Emotions run deep when you start doing that" (*TTN*, 8 August 1995). Many Vance residents were also upset when the Mercedes-Benz plant chose to use a Tuscaloosa postal address instead of one from Vance. Less than two years into the project, many Vance residents felt that creating national (if not international) recognition for their community, ironically, had precipitated its loss of identity. Newspaper articles and editorials began to reflect these new narratives about Vance.

How did the residents' narratives about Vance change because of the Mercedes-Benz plant? How did they redefine their community story? To address these questions, we used information from twenty-eight Vance resident interviews originally collected between January 1994 and November 1996. These interviews consisted of 17 male and 11 female Vance residents, representing a cross-section of the community (town leaders, people in the coffee shop, at public meetings, and those being relocated). Participants were identified through preexisting contacts with local community members and through additional snowball sampling procedures. Specifically, maximum verification purposive sampling ([Guba and Lincoln 1989](#); [Kuzel 1992](#)) techniques were used in an effort to assure a broad range of perspectives. Respectively, efforts were taken to identify a wide variety of people—e.g., those individuals who would be in the available labor market for employment in the factory, those who expected to reap economic benefits from construction efforts, those who expected positive/negative impacts to themselves and/or the community, those who had played a key role in locating the plant in Vance—for inclusion in the study. To wit, participants were selected from residents of the Vance community including, for example, (1) those who may or may not have been seeking employment with Mercedes-Benz, (2) residents who had land holdings in the community and/or adjacent to the proposed plant site, (3) residents identified by other community members as "key actors"—as documented through newspapers, news broadcasts, and city positions, and/or (4) residents identified through other interviewees who could provide a unique perspective. In addition to the formal interviewing procedures, numerous other informal interviews and observations were made over the same period in town meetings and on the street.

While, "there is not one single way to analyze qualitative data", ([Creswell 2002](#), p. 258), efforts were taken to maintain the methodological rigor and analytical defensibility (see [Anfara et al. 2002](#)) of our research. For example, in addition to prolonged engagement and observation in the field, interviews were recorded when informants agreed. In a few cases only, field notes were taken. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. In an effort to assure data quality, when possible, transcripts and cursory analysis were subjected to member checks ([Creswell and Miller 2000](#)). Throughout the analytic process, transcripts and field notes were subjected to multiple readings to identify common themes. These were identified through words, sentences, or other units of information that constitute recurrent patterns in interviews with most, if not all, subjects. We viewed such themes as storylines in the emerging community narratives. Though themes are intrinsic to the

information provided by the subjects, the researchers identified and then coded them according to concepts or easily remembered words that conveyed similar meanings. In other words, we reconciled our understanding of an emerging larger story with each subject's individual story. Each interview provided information that either enhanced or cast doubt on emerging storylines. Depending on the degree of doubt, coded themes were modified or even discarded as new evidence emerged across interviews (see Miles et al. 2014). As the analytic process progressed, our research team continued coding data to help to ensure that interview procedures and field observations reflected the concepts and themes found in the interview data. Ultimately, through a triangulation of prolonged engagement in the field, member checks, and insights gleaned from a broad range of perspectives, we determined the salience of the coded themes by the attention and importance given to them in the interviews. In an effort to ensure the validity and reliability of coding, multiple team members would compare coding decisions and work together to continually refine our analytic process (Berg 2008). To further safeguard the integrity of emergent patterns, we use representative—often lengthy—quotes to exemplify the themes we identified in the residents' narratives, focusing on how residents perceived changes in their community and, in turn, how they modified their community stories to reconcile these changes.

7. Residents' Stories about Their Community

The following are excerpts from the residents' narratives that describe their perceptions of what their community was *before* the announcement and building of the Mercedes-Benz plant.

7.1. Sense of Belonging, Identity and Security

Interviewees felt strongly that they belonged to an identifiable community in which they had a secure place and where they knew the other members who belonged to it. One resident commented: "I could ride up the road and wave at all the people I knew . . . wave at friends. It was just a friendly community, period". Another said: "Everybody knows everybody, they're friends". There is a strong sense of longevity to the community in these narratives. People have been "rooted" to the place for generations and still identify specific places with long-time family names and histories: "Vance is a community where everyone knows one another. Most of the people of Vance have lived here all of their lives. Their parents lived here. Their grandparents have lived here. It's that kind of community". One long-time community resident described family properties that link multiple family members and generations to place and community:

Here's the place my mother and father moved back to when he quit saw milling in Birmingham. They moved back here and farmed it with my grandparents—another uncle lived here and another in that house up there. The next house here on the right, my mother's uncle and his family lived there. My first cousin and her husband own this place here. So, due to those large families and bean farmers, they had a lot of property through here that was in the family. This place right here, I'm told, was bought for \$1000 an acre—that's before Mercedes—there's 359 acres of it.

Significantly, interviewees also felt that they could call on their "community" generically if help was needed and that word would get out quickly through informal channels of communication:

Well, it's like this—if I broke a leg I can make one phone call to somebody and they'd be feeding my animals, they'd never miss a meal—I could make another phone call to someone else if my truck broke or my car broke and it would be fixed. We've always had a certain amount of dependence on the other one's ability of what they could do and would do if we got in a bind.

Another interviewee also commented on the access to local resources and help: "If I needed help wiring up a plug in my house, I didn't have to call in an electrician, I just kind of mentioned that I had to do this down at the store and somebody was there".

The community was often characterized as “family”. It was seen as close-knit and trustworthy. One resident described trust for his neighbors and residents who lived close by:

There ain’t nothin’ no stronger than a family or community from my point of view. People knowing that there’s people out there they can trust that’s your neighbor, not necessarily your neighbor but the man down the street. He might be a mile away, but if you need him you know he’s there. He might not come to see you every week. You might not see him for a month but you know if you need that fella he’s there.

One resident described the closeness of neighbors who, like family, came to help without being asked:

Even though we all live in our own houses, homes, it was like a big family. I know people who live two or three miles up the road and they know me. Vance is the type of place where if anyone had a problem, needed help, they wouldn’t have to ask . . . Vance is the type of place that when you would go into the town of Vance, you threw you hand up and said “Hi” to everybody. It was like one big family.

This narrative about people pitching in to help was tied to the small size and intimacy of the community by other interviewees. As mournfully expressed by one long-time resident, this sense of closeness is accompanied by a sense of communal loss associated with the recent changes:

Here in this community, we help each other when needed—young and old alike. We won’t have that anymore. You don’t have it in Birmingham. You don’t have that in Tuscaloosa, except maybe in secluded neighborhoods. Everybody here knows everybody and if you get in trouble, you don’t have to go far to find somebody that’ll help you when you need it. Everybody knows whose kids is whose, so we take care of and look out for each other’s kids, we help each other out when we have trouble. It’s been that way ever since I’ve been here. We moved here in [1930s]—I was five years old. It’s always been a close-knit community. I care as much about these kids that run around here as I do my own. I just think that everybody needs to help raise our kids—we won’t have that again.

A sense of security was mentioned frequently. For example, one resident said: “I left my key in my car”. Another said simply, “We were secure”. In both cases, the sense of security was associated with the community’s size and the fellowship of residents—although one resident explained that this sense had shifted with recent changes in the community: “Until very recent history, I didn’t lock the doors to my house”.

7.2. Community Change

When asked how their community had changed since the arrival of Mercedes-Benz, the narrative became more complicated, indicating nuanced themes. Analysis of the interviews identified five primary sub-themes: Displacement, Insecurity, Loss of autonomy, Strain on existing friendships, and Loss of a small-town feeling.

Displacement. People juxtaposed their feelings of belonging before the building of Mercedes-Benz and their sense of displacement afterward. Their narratives often reveal the loss of personal identity as identification with their changed community: “My feeling down there is not good. I don’t feel like I belong here. I exist. You’ve read the story in school called ‘Man Without a Country?’ Okay, that’s what you feel like; you feel like your country has stepped on you”. This feeling was particularly acute if people had lived in Vance all of their lives:

You don’t belong. I mean, where we were, I had been there all my life. My whole life was within a two-mile radius, which a lot of people may think this is stupid, but you had your life in a two-mile radius. The church was a mile from the house. I worked at the school that was two miles from my house. And so everything, my whole life, was right there in that two-mile radius. And when that’s always been, you know it’s hard to readjust.

Insecurity. After the plant was operating, instead of the factory providing a general sense of security, personal safety and safeguarding property became an obsession; the sense of communal trust had evaporated:

My whole attitude of life has changed. My attitude of life before this happened was that you come to my house and you said I want to buy this or I want to buy that or can I sell you this . . . I didn't need a piece of paper. I didn't need to know your background. I didn't need to know who you were. We shook hands on it and that was fine with me. I don't trust nobody no more. . . . My faith in people has went from here to way down.

Another resident similarly described the new sense of distrust: "I just don't have any faith and that's a terrible thing not to have".

Familiar routines were displaced by new ones that residents have yet to reconcile. The following illustrates this new sense of insecurity:

They're not as secure as they used to be. I mean you take a road that had twenty cars a day on it and you knew every one of them to a hundred twenty cars a day and you don't know but about ten of 'em You don't feel as secure. I wouldn't. I don't feel as secure . . . here. I lock my door. I take my key out of the car now. I don't leave my lawn mower sittin' outside. My boat's locked up. And there's nothing wrong with this community, not a thing in the world; it's just my faith in people has went to nothin'. It's terrible, but that's the truth.

One respondent who lost his house to the state so that the latter could build an off-ramp for the new plant said this about insecurity:

Well, I just don't think the ones that are left feel secure anymore. They don't know when somebody's gonna come in and, you know, like the highway department's gonna come through and widen the roads there and they're gonna have to move. I don't think anybody is secure anymore, and you talk to people now and you tell them how we were done and they say, 'Why, I can believe they can do that, that they can just come in and make you move and you not want to move.' People just really do not realize the state has that power.

Loss of Autonomy. Associated with an increased sense of insecurity is a feeling of losing control over one's future. The Mercedes-Benz plant physically dislocated many households. One resident commented, "I thought that I had enough power that what was mine was mine, but now I've found out it's only if somebody else doesn't want it. I don't have any". Another stated, "It wasn't that you'd lost your home. That wasn't no consideration to them whatsoever. The only thing people had to say was, 'Did you get a fair price?' That was all they cared about".

Strain on Friendships. The previous quote shows that even old friendships were strained as the new plant began to take shape. Some people wondered why their friends did not care about their displacement, only whether the change turned out well financially and how the new industry could be economically beneficial.

Well, as soon as people heard, they decided they wouldn't sell. If you were sitting somewhere and a big plant was going in, what would you do? Are you going to sell it for \$500 an acre when next year it may be worth \$20,000? I understood both sides because I was a landowner, and I also understood the people, my very good friends, that were being displaced. I understood their problems in not being able to stay in the community in which they have lived all their life like I have. I realized that we need industry, and I'm all for that.

The changes also affected people's relationships in informal organizations, such as church. Old friends moved out of the area served by the local churches:

It has torn the churches up because so many of the staunch back-bone Christians had to move. Most of us around here are Baptist. They couldn't find anything around here—two or

three of the couples ended up in Brookwood and had to join that church; some ended up in Coaling, some in Tuscaloosa—they were scattered everywhere.

Loss of a Small-Town Feeling. Perhaps the most frequently cited change in the emerging community narrative post Mercedes-Benz was the loss of a small-town feeling. Residents expressed contradictory feelings about the economic benefits the community had and their emotions about losing their community: even when residents said they knew the town needed more industry, they yearned for the small and intimate feeling they fear will be lost.

Oh, I'm glad. We are all glad. We have lost quite a number of large industries and we are glad for [Mercedes Benz] to come anywhere in Alabama. And, of course, we were most glad that it came to Tuscaloosa County. We realized when they told us that it was coming here that we were going to have to sacrifice; we knew this. We knew that our little town as we knew it was gone. I've known everybody all my life, and 35 people were displaced and found that they could not buy land anywhere, they had to move out of the area—I mean good people.

Another resident described the loss this way: "Vance is slipping away. Vance is not as it once was at this point, it's not the same since Mercedes Benz".

People felt that, as friends left the community, even if they moved to the next county, the sense of community was diminished:

We've had too many friends and family go. They haven't gone far, but I cannot get in my truck and spend one minute to get to some of my friends' house, my very close friends. I can't do that anymore. Long distance to call, fifteen or so minutes to get there. Which it don't sound like far, but it's a long cry from what it was.

Some also were concerned that Vance would simply become an industrial park:

We were talking about spin-off industries a while ago. If Mercedes-Benz grows and does what they have projected it to do, there is going to be more of an invasion, more land taking, more families that will have to go, more roads that will come through and I think they're thinking more about that end of it. In other words, Vance will not be Vance anymore. It will be almost non-existent. You're looking at a giant industrial park.

Where opposition was expressed toward the Mercedes-Benz plant, it tended to be about losing the small-town atmosphere:

The opposition of Mercedes is on that basis. Folks don't want to lose the small-town flavor and the convenience of the big city next door. We fear the fact that Tuscaloosa will come out, and already is, and imposing these new regulations and we're losing the right and the freedom to do with our property as we see fit.

The loss of the small-town feeling is also related to spatial changes. As one resident described:

There're other factors that need to be looked at. I've lived here sixteen years. I can go out my door and look any direction and I don't see a neighbor. That's the way I chose to live. That's the way I choose to live now. I have been denied that right if I have to live in a subdivision. That's not the way I want to live. I want to live in a private atmosphere like I live now. Not because I'm antisocial, it's what I like.

Others expressed similar views: "When we first got here we tried town living, but when you're out on your curb and somebody's looking, you know, it's uncomfortable if you're not used to it. We weren't in town very long". Another resident said, "When somebody's up against you, you can't walk out in your yard without your shirt on and somebody seeing and being offended by it, you know. That's the kind of atmosphere I don't want to live in". There was, in addition, the ever-present fear of becoming a Tuscaloosa suburb:

The first remark I made when they announced it was you can kiss Vance goodbye. In the end the economic factors will force Vance probably to be absorbed into the city of Tuscaloosa or Birmingham or some other large municipality—most likely Tuscaloosa because Tuscaloosa will be able to provide the people that will be here the services they need and desire. Vance probably will not have enough tax-base to support what the people here will want in services—especially as it grows. You'll have then people who will not be spending their money in Vance but will be demanding services from Vance where they live. It's like my piggy bank—it can't sustain me without my putting something back in it for so long. So, the purse strings will tighten—Vance won't be able to do it because they won't have the income and the people will say if you can't do it, we'll get Tuscaloosa to do it. And it has happened in other communities in other areas.

The relationship to Tuscaloosa has been for Vance residents to maintain a separate identity but to benefit from the larger town's proximity. The convenience will remain, but the identity will erode:

My personal opposition to it is basically this is home, this is where I intended to raise my children because I like the community. I like the convenience of everything. I like the small-town atmosphere and the convenience of being able to shop not 20 miles away and run back. I can, in 25 min, be in three different Walmart stores—there's not many places in the country that you can be in three big super stores or Walmart stores in 25 min. When people start moving in here along with business that might come, all this will disappear. It won't be no small town that convenient to the big city anymore.

8. Conclusions

This study offers a theoretical discussion for conceptualizing “community as story”—narratives that create and recreate a definition and relationship to community. Community narratives are typically reflected in stories that reminisce about what the community was and speculate about what it will be, and become part of a new community story. We used a variety of disciplinary sources and quotes to show how community as story can be seen as a dynamic process in which individual and collective narratives are combined to form a mythic structure that shapes the residents' perceptions. Additionally, we discussed how community stories occur in time and place, and how, as changes to the place occur, residents are compelled to adjust their stories, their identities and definitions. Using Vance, Alabama, as a historical empirical illustration of the community as story approach, we explored the changing nature of this community after the construction of a manufacturing plant. In this case, individual subjective experiences of change in Vance contributed to rewriting the story of the community as residents dealt with a sense of loss, feelings of displacement, insecurity, loss of autonomy, relationship strain, and the erosion of a small-town feeling. While our use of this case study was singularly aimed at providing an empirical illustration of our broader theoretical discussion for conceptualizing “community as story”, nevertheless, it points to future ways in which researchers can refine understating of how community stories are rewritten over time. For example, our data do not allow a clear understanding of community narratives that existed prior to the installation of the Mercedes-Benz plant; rather, we focus on a “contemporary” rewriting of community transpiring in the face of social change. Furthermore, this historical case study was attuned to specific actors who occupied and inherited stories at a particular place and time; what stories are being told in the same place today?

One final dip into the proverbial Jell-O community: “All communities ... are imagined” (Anderson 2006, p. 6). Envisioning community as story highlights the dynamic and subjective relationship residents have with their imagined communities and the places where those relationships happens. A continuing narrative allows people to reconcile changes in their community, to imagine a new community as they perceive a shift from a former one. Their story may not match the emergent meta-narrative, but they will be familiar with it and, indirectly, contribute to it. These narratives

constantly create and recreate community through stories by people for people. The narratives from Vance are a temporal slice of a continual process of how we constantly change community through the narratives—the stories—about *our* community and *who* and *what* it is. To repeat what was said at the outset of this paper, it is not our intent to discount other more objectifiable aspects of community or other theories of community. Our dip into the Jell-O attempts to show that there is “even more slipping through our fingers” concerning the conceptualization and study of community than we previously acknowledged—or imagined.

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