

A BOUNDED CASE STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY LEADERS: AN
EXAMINATION OF ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND ADULT
LEARNING IN A RURAL SOUTH GEORGIA COMMUNITY

by

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(Under the Direction of Desna L. Wallin)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this bounded case study was to explore how rural leaders experience community development and to understand the perceptions of community leaders in identifying and promoting community assets, including human assets and learning. Research questions that guided this study were as follows: (1) How do community leaders experience rural community development? (2) What roles do community leaders play in creating a learning environment through rural community development? (3) How do rural community leaders define assets, specifically human assets and learning opportunities, within this rural south Georgia community? (4) In what ways do community leaders utilize assets in community development activities? This study examined how rural community leaders view and utilize their roles as community leaders in the community development process. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) served as the conceptual framework for this study and guided the examination of adult learning opportunities as assets in the rural community studied.

This bounded case study explored the role of 12 rural community leaders of a particular south Georgia county. These 12 leaders were chosen based on formal leadership positions or by a snowball method of participant selection. The participants responded to interview questions involving their roles in community development and their perceptions of assets the County holds, including adult learning programs or activities.

As a result of the process of constant comparative method of analysis, four themes emerged from the data collected: (1) varying definitions of community development from community leaders, including an inseparable connection between community and economic development in rural development and a strong response from participants describing the people within the community, (2) the importance of collaboration among community citizens and entities in the community development process, (3) the existence of politics in identifying and utilizing assets in community development, and (4) a weak acknowledgment and utilization of adult learning opportunities as assets to aid in rural development.

From these findings, four conclusions emerged: (1) economic development is a key component of community development, (2) communication and collaboration among community leaders and citizens are key components of a community's development, (3) community development is a political process characterized by the exclusion of key assets, and (4) community leaders must see adult learning opportunities as assets in the community development process.

INDEX WORDS: Adult Learning, Asset-Based Community Development, Bounded Case Study,

Community Development

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DEDICATION

To Joley Nicole

My Little Monkey

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CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

My life belongs to the community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I
can. – George Bernard Shaw

The physical characteristics of what constitutes an American community are likely to be the first images that cross one's mind when he or she is asked to define the term "community." Depending on the individual questioned, these images may include a skyline cluttered with high rises or one that is only interrupted by the sporadic appearance of a few homes or trees. Regardless of the physical characteristics that constitute an individual's initial sense of community, a community involves much more than landscape and buildings.

Communities are comprised of "three elements: (1) territory or place, (2) social organizations or institutions that provide regular interaction among residents, and (3) social interaction on matters concerning a common interest" (Green & Haines, 2008, p. 2). According to Morse (2004), the definition of a community includes place, relationships, and interests. In fact, these common themes exist in many researchers' definitions of community because they are interwoven within a place-based community. Whether categorized as an urban community or a rural community, a wealthy or an impoverished one, place-based communities still have embedded within them groups of people joined together by relationships, interests, and organizations. For the purposes of this study, communities of place were the focus. While some aspects of this study involved organizational communities or communities of interest, the overall focus was on the rural south Georgia setting of the study.

In October 2009, the United States Census Bureau estimated the number of people occupying American communities of place at over 307 million. Ultimately, the millions of individuals occupying American communities determine how each of their communities are defined or viewed as much as the physical assets these communities boast. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) state of communities, “each...boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future” (p. 6). Through their involvement in community groups, community residents determine which of these unique assets define how their community will be viewed by others. Thus, community citizens interact within both formal and informal associations to achieve community goals (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). This interaction melds the elements of place, relationships, and interests that comprise the definition of community into one type of community, the associational community.

The term “associational community” was introduced in the early 1990s by John McKnight, who simply defined these communities as “groups of people voluntarily coming together to do some good” (Block, 2008, p. 13). But this type of community has not just evolved in American culture. In fact, when French count Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 19th century, he returned to France and shared his amazement at how associational Americans were, operating closely together by their relationships and interests, as compared to the European style of community business only being handled by an elite few (McKnight, 1996; Morse, 2004). These elite few consisted of elected officials, lawyers, and other members of the power elite of a community. Somewhere in the last century, American communities have lost some of this association that Tocqueville found so intriguing. In today’s communities, citizens of informal associations expect their community leaders, citizens involved in formal associations, to initiate and lead community development projects, but this power given to leaders has fallen into the

category of complete control. In many communities, citizens are stepping away from community development altogether.

Perhaps one reason that community citizens are leaving the frontlines of the development process is that community development is often confused with or mistaken for economic development. Economic development typically focuses on the business and industry development of a community, adding more physical and monetary assets that a place-based community could not thrive without. But while economic development is certainly beneficial to a community's well-being, this type of development is not the focus of this study. Community development is what this study will explore, specifically a focus on social interactions of community citizens, particularly community leaders. In their discussion on community building, Green and Haines (2008) state, "the development of a community involves the existence of social institutions or organizations that provide the opportunity for regular social interaction among members" (p. 3). The goal of community development is to create literal and/or figurative associations that belong to and are organized by various community citizens, not just community leaders.

While many community leaders should be expected to be exemplary role models for community citizens, this does not mean they should not be given the power of all decision-making in a community. In regards to community development, the description of a community that relies solely on its leaders for community building is one involving needs and problems instead of assets and solutions (Kretmann & McKnight, 1993; Snow, 2001). This needs-based approach occurs in both urban and rural communities and is a way to solicit help, in the forms of financial and physical aid, from community citizens and outsiders. Many urban communities emphasize needs and problems as a way to get community citizens and community groups

involved and shed light on their projects often for national recognition or aid. While not an ideal move for the overall good of building the community, this approach may work in the initial stages of building the community, as urban areas have various in-house resources upon which to draw in rectifying problems. However, such an initial approach, especially if this is the only approach taken, is more likely to make rural community issues worse, taking a community with few visible assets already and blanketing these with a negative light. Despite the possibility of making a bad situation worse, many rural communities operate in this manner.

Rural Communities and Their Leaders

Rural areas are prolific in America. Overall, the United States Department of Agriculture (2008), drawing from U. S. Census data, estimates that 97.5 percent of all land area in the United States classifies as rural. According to U.S. Census data from 2000, over 20 percent of the entire population of the United States resides in these extremely rural areas, areas that do not house a population of 50,000 or more (termed urban) or a dense population of 2,500 to 49,999 (an urban cluster), (FHWA, 2004). These areas of 2,500 people are categorized by city, town, village, or incorporated area, so a rural town or village of 2,499 or fewer individuals would constitute a rural community. While these smaller communities' citizens are more likely to share common interests and closer relationships, as Morse (2004) suggested necessary for a strong sense of community, these areas are less likely to be able solely to draw upon assets housed within a community. Compared to a community with 50,000 people or more, such a rural area could have a difficult time gathering resources—such as money, materials, and volunteers—to develop the community. As compared to their larger counterparts, rural communities would have a much more difficult time locating resources for installing a new community sewage system or

remodeling a local school. As a result, these communities, specifically their elected officials, are in charge of locating resources to aid in these projects elsewhere.

Often times, as Block (2008) notes, communities put their leaders in difficult positions by distorting “them into service providers and suppliers” (p. 90). Therefore, especially in rural communities, leaders may initially seek resources outside of their community. This move causes community citizens to become more of clients and consumers rather than citizens (Block, 2008; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2002; Morse, 2004), resulting in the community appearing to community citizens and outsiders as more dire than may be the reality. Ideally, all community citizens would be involved in developing their community rather than just be clients of their leader’s actions. However, in this needs-based approach to building community, citizens expect these leaders to solve issues for them that they as citizens should be solving themselves (Block, 2008). As a result, community citizens become too reliant on those in community leadership roles and lose the sense of what constitutes community, the physical structures *and* the relationships and interests of all citizens, which constitutes a community. Rural communities are setting themselves up for failure when only a few people are involved in improving the community. An asset-based approach would put a more positive spin on community involvement; first, community leaders have to step out of their role of satisfying citizens’ demands and build partnerships revolving around all citizens as leaders (Block, 2008).

Rural Community Development and Community Leaders

Communities have ongoing problems with issues such as housing, funding, and employment, so it is very easy for a person or group in charge of community development to use those needs as a way to draw attention to a community or persuade policymakers to vote for increased funding of an area. As mentioned earlier, this is a typical approach to community

development, as Kretzmann (1995) notes of the attitude of many community developers: “Help from the outside will arrive only when a convincing story of emptiness and need has been told” (para. 4). Most commonly, those in community leadership roles are the ones responsible for a community’s image and influential in what the citizens see as assets that could be utilized in community development.

Community leaders often overlook assets that could be utilized in community development. In some cases, assets such as learning opportunities could be taken for granted. As a result, an entire community could fail to realize the potential that these assets could have in developing the community. Educational opportunities for youth, such as public school systems and recreational departments, are generally recognized and utilized well in community development. However, learning programs tailored to adults are often overlooked or missing in rural communities. Such opportunities could be adult literacy education programs, General Education Development (GED) preparation, and cooperative extension services for adults. In a search for community assets, these adult learning opportunities should be recognized and drawn upon throughout the community development process.

As noted by Robert Chambers (1983) in his discussion of rural poverty, “a search for opportunities can generate an agenda for action” (p. 159). Ultimately, people enjoy discussing and engaging in positive ideas and actions, not negative ones. For the sake of successful community development, especially in rural areas where a deficiency-based approach happens most commonly, community leaders have a responsibility for the way their community is viewed and views itself. These community leaders’ actions should shed a positive light on a community and its assets, not a derogatory one.

Conceptual Framework – Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)

A community approach that emphasizes leaders who are aware of the responsibility mentioned above is Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), presented by John McKnight and John Kretzmann in the early 1990s. Serving as the conceptual framework for this study, ABCD is an alternative approach to deficiency-based community development that encourages initial mapping stages in the development process. Together, community leaders and citizens—all stakeholders in the development—positively “map” out or categorize their communities’ assets in order to begin a positively-focused community development process. However, how to get these entities together to begin the mapping in the initial stages of an asset-based approach is unclear.

The traditional approach to community development that community leaders take involves their initiation of a project followed by their recruitment of others to meet the leaders’ goals (Campfens, 1997). However, community leaders do not have to be the ones to initiate community development projects nor do citizens have to acquiesce only to the projects created by these leaders. Although these community leaders hold the political and/or social power necessary to get together teams of people to work on various community development projects, many times that power, appearing “dominating, distorting or demeaning,” is daunting to some citizens and may prevent them from joining the action (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 372). Because rural community leaders have historically been solely responsible for community development, many community citizens consciously stay clear of the process.

As an alternative, an asset-based approach defines community leaders as public servants. According to Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), “a servant supports and does not control. A servant never suggests that the employer could ‘participate’ in the servant’s work. The servant

‘supports’ the employer’s work” (p. 372). This may prove a difficult move for many rural community leaders, who are accustomed to meeting the “needs” of their citizens but not really engaging these citizens in that effort. As noted by Walker (2006), “Once people’s eyes are opened to community assets, a positive energy for change takes over” (p. 25). This positive energy is necessary to keep the community development momentum going, and community leaders may be the perfect asset to utilize when trying to get community citizens engaged.

From the beginning stages of the process, these leaders should involve community citizens in moving forward with the process, specifically creating a mission and vision that the community can take ownership in and be proud of. An asset-based approach to community development is a process that involves building a true community of leaders, one which builds the community as a space for everyone to be a leader. For this to happen, community leaders need to reevaluate how they view their roles and take a step back to allow more citizen involvement.

Walker (2006) states, “A sense of ownership inevitably leads to accountability” (p. 26). Everyone involved, particular those who hold community leadership positions, should continually emphasize the idea that community citizens are responsible for the successes of the community development process. This gives them reinforcement that they are in control of their successes, which will hopefully lead to their wanting to stay involved in the process.

If community leaders can motivate citizens to participate, then a shared responsibility for a development can emerge. As a result, "the solutions to adaptive challenges frequently emerge from shared leadership across organizations and agencies that inspire the respective members to work towards a common vision with equitable sharing of power and responsibility" (Rude, Paolucci-Whitcomb & Comerford, 2005, para. 25). Although this power sharing responsibility is

embedded in community leadership positions, community leaders must be willing to view their citizens as leaders of community development and empower these citizens to take responsibility of their communities as well.

Statement of the Problem

Rural communities have long been the focus of community development efforts because of the appearance of a lack of resources. Often due to the presence of persistent poverty, many rural communities do not appear to have a plethora of assets on which to develop the communities from within. Therefore, many rural communities often approach community development by searching for resources beyond their community. In fact, many rural communities have relied on their needs and deficiencies to influence their search for aid in the community development process.

However, as governmental and non-profit organizations feel the crunch of the economy's struggles and resources from them are stretched, rural communities must employ the alternative to a needs-based approach and reliance on outside sources. These communities should depend more on their own assets and resources in order to function. Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) encourages communities to "map" their assets, ranging from personal skills to community organizations, and promote leadership among all citizens in order to create a self-sufficient community. Ideally, community citizens would be eager to participate in their community's development, particularly when the focus of the development efforts is within the community. However, as noted by Cervero and Wilson (2006), "people make judgments with others in social contexts about specific program features" (p. 6). Often times, because of the traditional role of community leaders, citizens take a step back from

these projects and give control to those in leadership position in their communities, which is counterintuitive to the goal of an asset-based approach.

Ultimately, everyone who lives within a community is a stakeholder in the community development process. Therefore, rural community leaders must be willing to share some of the responsibility of rural community development by constantly encouraging citizens to take charge or at least become involved. In fact, the most important role of a community leader “is to bring citizens together” (Block, 2008, p. 90). Strong and collaborative leadership is needed for a community development approach such as Asset-Based Community Development to work.

Recent studies on community development are not lacking, as evidenced in the studies of Block (2008), Campfens (1997), Ellis and Biggs (2001), Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), and Morse (2004), to name a few. Furthermore, many studies also include a specific focus on rural development as well (Carlton-LaNey, Edwards, & Reid, 1999; Flora & Flora, 2008; Ludlow, Keramidas, & Kossar, 2008; Sanders & Lewis, 1973; Summers, 1986). Likewise, research focusing on asset-based development, mainly ABCD, is available (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2002; McKnight, 1996; Page-Adams & Sherraden, 1997). However, most of the studies revolving around ABCD or other asset-based approaches focus on urban communities. Typically, urban communities have more physical assets and more people from which to map skills, so more research in the possibility of applying an asset-based approach in a rural community is needed to test its applicability to a rural setting. Furthermore, most ABCD studies present a community’s map and its success stories. Little research has been conducted covering how rural community leaders define their community’s assets related to community development, especially focusing on community citizens’ recruitment in the community’s development and what roles community leaders play in encouraging citizen

involvement and learning (Flora & Flora, 2008; Vidich & Bensman, 1958; White & Marks, 1999). Since citizen empowerment is a key element of an asset-based approach, further research is needed on how rural community leaders currently involve citizens or encourage citizens to become leaders in their community's development.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this bounded case study was to explore how rural leaders experience rural community development and to understand the perceptions of community leaders in identifying and promoting community assets, including human assets and learning opportunities. Research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do community leaders experience rural community development?
2. What roles do community leaders play in creating a learning environment through rural community development?
3. How do rural community leaders define assets, specifically human assets and learning opportunities, within this rural south Georgia community?
4. In what ways do community leaders utilize assets in community development activities?

This study examined how rural community leaders view and utilize their roles as community leaders in the community development process.

Significance

The significance of this study is two-part. First, this study sought to help fill the gap in research related to how rural community leaders utilize their leadership roles in the community development process. As noted, most of the existing data surrounding community development and community leaders revolves around urban communities. Furthermore, those studies that do

have rural development components lack a focus on the roles of rural community leaders in an asset-based development approach, an approach suggested by research to be more effective than alternative needs-based approaches.

A second goal of this study was to examine the practice of rural community leaders. An asset-based approach to community development requires leaders to work as partners with community citizens to promote development, so studies are needed to determine if this approach is already in progress in this rural community. These findings, in turn, suggest the applicability of an asset-based approach to rural communities and further define the roles that rural community leaders have in community development.

Definitions

The following definitions were used throughout this study:

ABCD – This term refers to Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) Asset-Based Community Development, a community development approach which involves utilizing all assets from within a community before seeking outside resources.

Community citizens – This term is used to describe anyone who lives within the community in question and anyone who stands to benefit from any sort of improvements made to the community.

Community development – This term is used to describe any effort to improve the social, civic, and mental well-being of a community and all of its citizens.

Community leaders – This term is used to describe those who hold positional power in the community, such as mayors, county commissioners, a Chamber of Commerce President, a Development Authority President, a school principal or superintendent, etc.

Economic development – This term is used to describe development that is related to business and industry in the community and impacts the economic well-being of all citizens.

Stakeholders – This term refers to anyone who is influenced by a community's development, including all community citizens, workers, visitors, and neighbors.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Never doubt that a small, group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. – Margaret Mead

Rural American communities have been in the spotlight of community development for more than 300 years, with the most well-known development approach occurring with the founding of the country itself. Despite technological and agricultural advancements, rural communities still exhibit a need for development approaches. Much like the approach taken during the founding of America, today's American communities are finding themselves relying mainly on their own resources for development, not outside resources. With economic downturns comes a lack of state and federal resources from which rural communities can draw. With these changes comes the shifting of rural community leadership as well; community leaders are no longer able to ensure successful community development by relying on the solicitation of outside funding. Because they are having to shift to a more inside-out approach, community leaders are finding that community development cannot work without its main asset: the community citizens.

The purpose of this bounded case study was to explore how rural leaders experience rural community development and to understand the perceptions of community leaders in identifying

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3. How do rural community leaders define assets, specifically human assets and learning opportunities, within this rural south Georgia community?
4. In what ways do community leaders utilize assets in community development activities?

This study examined how rural community leaders view and utilize their roles as community leaders in the community development process. This case study was bound to a particular rural south Georgia county. This study examined how that rural county's community leaders view and utilize their roles as community leaders in the community development process.

This study examined the perceptions various community leaders, such as school administration (college director, public school superintendent), local community leaders (chamber of commerce president, city mayor, county commissioners), and civic leaders (Rotary president), hold as to what roles they play in their rural community's development.

This chapter examines existing literature of the following key areas related to this study: (a) American communities, (b) community development theory and approaches (including a focus on Asset-Based Community Development in relation to rural communities, (c) community leadership, specifically leaders in formal positions in rural communities, and (d) adult learning in rural communities.

Beyond drawing information from textbooks and websites pertaining to communities and community development (specifically, Asset-Based Community Development, or ABCD), existing research was found through the following databases: ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Academic Search Complete (at EBSCOhost), and Research Library (at ProQuest). The search terms used were American and communities, American and rural and communities, Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), asset building and community development, rural and community development, community and leadership, rural and leadership, positions and leaders and community, and role and community leadership/leaders.

The American Community: An Overview

Generally, when the term community is used, people may envision a specific place, perhaps a downtown street, a local school, or a collection of homes filled with familiar people and connected to years of memories. While these physical characteristics are main ingredients of a community, the definition of a community, as supported by Green and Haines (2008), also involves more intangible assets. The authors contend that a community includes physical elements, social organizations, and social interaction within the community in order to meet a common interest (Green & Haines, 2008). Just as important as the physical aspects of a community, social organizations and interactions are crucial elements in building a true community (Wilkinson, 1991). According to Wilkinson (1991), “Social interaction delineates a territory as the community locale; it provides the associations that comprise the local society; it gives structure and direction to the processes of collective action, and it is the source of community identity” (p. 11). More specifically, Green and Haines (2008) note that the use of the term community “may or may not be place based” whereas the term neighborhood should probably be saved to refer to a certain specific geographical reference (p. 3).

According to Morse (2004), a community is “where individuals live, connect, and are responsible for one another” (p. 3). Ultimately, despite the size, location, or economic opportunity of a community, a community is a place that people call home (Morse, 2004). Therefore, no amount of tangible assets within a place-based community can fully create a true sense of community. The social elements at work in a community are key elements that come into play in building “home.”

Communities of Place versus Interest

In defining a community, many researchers agree that the term is utilized in a plethora of instances, whether it is one of a physical nature or of a psychological nature. In various studies relating to communities in America, Wilkinson (1991) lists three elements that make up a community:

a locality, a local society, and a process of locality oriented collective actions [termed a community field]. A locality is a territory where people live and meet their daily needs together. A local society is a comprehensive network of associations for meeting common needs and expressing common interests. A community field is a process of interrelated actions through which residents express their common interest in the local society. (p. 2)

Wilkinson (1991) further explains that the term neighborhood is not interchangeable with the term community because a neighborhood is missing key elements of what constitutes the entirety of a society. Furthermore, groups who refer to themselves as a community are not necessarily a community if they do not “live and act together” (Wilkinson, 1991, p. 3). Therefore, based on this definition, social elements are also essential components of a community.

Similarly to Wilkinson's (1994) definition, Morse (2004) asserts that the term community can be used very formally or casually, depending on its context. Morse (2004) states, "Community evolves around three nexuses: the community of relationships, the community of interests, and the community of place" (p. 2). These three elements appear to be staples in defining communities, as Flora and Flora (2008) agree that the term is comprised of three elements:

In one use of the term, community refers to a place, a location in which members of a group interact with one another. A second use of the term looks at the social system itself, the organization or set of organizations through which a group of people meets its needs. Finally, sociologists also use the word community to describe a shared sense of identity held by a group of people who may or may not share the same geographic space. (p. 13).

Green and Haines (2008) also divide the multiple definitions of a community into three distinct groups: "(1) territory or place, (2) social organizations or institutions that provide regular interaction among residents, and (3) social interaction on matters concerning a common interest" (p. 2). As Green and Haines (2008) note, communities of place will always exist; cities, towns, neighborhoods, and the like will always have churches, shops, schools, and other buildings on which to base this definition of community. However, with the influx of the Internet, people have recently begun to expand their ideas of community, connecting with others well beyond the place-based scopes of a community. Social interaction has expanded from within specific neighborhoods to across the entire planet. This may explain the disconnect that some place-based communities, no matter how small, see among their citizens, especially in their civic involvement.

Since the founding of America, communities have struggled with stressing the civic responsibilities of community citizens. Morse (2004) states, “Concern over social challenges has been a part of the American psyche from the country’s birth” (p. 8). History shows that American communities were built around social classes, which presents itself in the structure of today’s American communities just as well. When a community’s focus is only on physical assets, as was the case even at the birth of America, other aspects of communities can become forgotten and overlooked. The results are communities, no matter how closely houses or organizations are physically built together, that have citizens who operate in the communities’ interests in ways that could be contradictory to one another. In other words, citizens may be involved in community development individually instead of as a team, and the result could be counterintuitive to the community’s development. Wilkinson (1991) sees the role of a community “as the setting and the mechanism of empirical contact between the individual and society” (p. 3). The experience of living within a particular community—the engagement, the interaction, the end product of participating in community activities—determines the social well-being of individuals within the community. Furthermore, communities have a role of “meeting the needs of people, especially the needs for collective involvement and social definition of self” (Wilkinson, 1994, p. 3). Therefore, the strength of a community is often determined by the strength of its social well-being.

American Rural Communities

As evidenced in the above section, studies and literature surrounding the definition of communities in America are not lacking. Specifically, this comprehensive research is often delineated or organized by its main focus on a type of community, urban or rural. Studies on these specific descriptions of a community tend to provide an overview of the people and places

that make up either demographic. Furthermore, the United States Census Bureau has provided researchers with data relating to these demographics for decades as well. In the past several decades, the data representative of these two categories—urban and rural—of communities have shifted greatly. More American citizens are finding that urban areas provide more opportunities for themselves and their families, leaving the future and the reputation of the American rural community in question.

In 1915, rural communities were often defined by their involvement in a trade area (schools, banks, healthcare, etc.) (Sanders & Lewis, 1976). Nearly three decades later, the definition of a rural community was still very much centered on the guiding crux of the community, i.e. the main focus of the community often defined it, and this was defined as the “neighborhood cluster method” (Sanders & Lewis, 1976, p.37). For example, rural communities were defined according to their guiding economic means. Years later, in the 1970s, noneconomic factors such as social interaction and place-based focus redefined the American rural community (Sanders & Lewis, 1976). Citizens made clear that they were just as interested in their communities’ social and residential opportunities than in their communities’ economic stance, stemming a focus on community development as opposed to a traditional focus on developing a community’s economy. Thus, a new view of the American rural community and the functions of its citizens had begun to form.

The U. S. Census Bureau defines a rural community as one that has a population of 2,500 or less. In 1970, the U. S. Census reported the total population of rural citizens as 11,237,000, “or approximately 8% of the US population” (Sanders & Lewis, 1976, p. 35). Years later, in 2000, the total population of rural citizens was 4,989,152, or 1.8% of the total U. S. population (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). Researchers of rural communities attribute this decrease to the

pattern of rural communities to provide little economic opportunity to its high number of impoverished citizens. According to Tickamyer & Duncan (1990),

Communities located outside metropolitan statistical areas have one fifth of the nation's population but one third of the poor. Jobs have been scarce and unstable in most rural communities for decades, and people have responded by...migrating to cities for better employment opportunities. (p. 68)

Thus, American rural communities are smaller and fewer. While this may seem beneficial to the overall development of a rural community, with small rural communities now being able to form close-knit relationships and work together to meet the goals of their community, this has not proven to be the case overall in American rural communities.

Often times, the general public may misinterpret their communities based on community stereotypes. Communities that physically appear tightly clustered may not necessarily house the strongest social bonds. This stereotype is especially true of rural communities as clichéd sayings such as everyone knowing everyone else's business in a small town are still very much applied to rural communities. However, as Morse (2004) contends, "Size...is no guarantee of more interaction among people on issues of common concern; some of the most divided communities are smaller ones" (p. 6). As a result, even small communities, ones that appear easy to manage, are likely to be the ones needing the most development or improvement in civic engagement. According to Dunbar (1999),

Although rural communities are small and theoretically easier to coordinate, the reality is that services too often are fragmented and not coordinated because they are funded separately and administered and provided from an office outside the community. Rural

communities suffer from a shortage of resources, a lack of service coordination, and restrictions of categorical funding streams. (p. 15)

This fragmentation of rural communities often leaves community citizens, including the leaders themselves, disconnected and frustrated. Therefore, a focus on improving the social and civic engagement of rural communities is still just as warranted as with any other American community, if not more.

The social make-up of a community is what determines the level of community development being achieved within a community. While larger communities have the resources to boast extensive economic development, all communities have the resources to boast strong community development, the crux of the social status of a community development. According to Morse (2004), “places of all sizes provide the opportunity to examine issues and remedies with fresh perspectives” (pp. 6-7). In the past, community improvement appears to have fallen from communities’ focuses since many community leaders may see success in terms of tangible assets, or the economic status of the community instead of the social well-being. However, as the research states, for true communities to be formed, both in rural and urban areas, a shifting focus on community development must occur within American communities.

This section has addressed the history of the American community, specifically focusing on American rural communities. Analyzing the stereotypes that accompany rural communities, this section highlights community engagement and focus. Community improvement is an on-going process since the make-ups, both physical and social, of American communities are constantly changing.

Community Development

Community development is not a new concept in America. Efforts to revitalize communities began at the turn of the century with the Progressive Era, where sociologists believed that poverty and crime were a result of broken communities, and matured late in the 1960s, the era where place-based community development blossomed (Green & Haines, 2008). Throughout these decades to today, community development practitioners note, “the notion persists that community is a qualitative field of social interaction with the capacity to influence and shape the well-being of participants” (Summers, 1986, p. 355). Ultimately, community development approaches today are centered on communities’ assets, mainly their citizens. This is especially true in rural community development, where these smaller communities remain a consistent focus of community development research today.

Most researchers agree that rural community development began with President Theodore Roosevelt’s 1908 Country Life Commission, with his stating, ““for our civilization rests at bottom on...the completeness, as well as the prosperity of life in the country”” (Summers, 1986; Cytron, 2007, p. 3; Green & Haines, 2008). Ultimately, the Commission “concluded that the major sources of the problems of rural people were lack of organization, failures of rural social institutions, and inadequate infrastructures” (Summers, 1986, p. 348). Thus, a sociological focus on rural community development arose.

Six years after Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission was formed, the Cooperative Extension Service was formed out of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, aiding in strengthening the rural land grant systems and utilizing community citizens to address community needs (Summers, 1986; Green & Haines, 2008). In the 1930s, President Roosevelt’s New Deal programs also aided struggling communities (Green & Haines, 2008). All of these movements

resulted in nearly a half century of governmental focus on agrarian life and improving the skills, technology, and educations of those involved in it. However, “the social forces that came in the wake of World War II swept rural community development off center stage, at least momentarily” (Summers, 1986, p. 349).

By the mid-1960s, President Johnson’s War on Poverty sparked new interest in struggling communities, albeit this program focused on mainly inner city poverty, and promoted the formation of Community Action Programs (CAPs) (Green & Haines, 2008). Out of these CAPs came a citizen reaction of distrust and dissatisfaction, as most of these programs were led by organizations or leaders who were in no way impoverished themselves and were often from outside the community of focus. In other words, the community citizens themselves were being overlooked in the community development process. Therefore, the roles of community leaders and community citizens in community development were beginning to be questioned.

Place-based communities, such as rural communities, often have to be careful in their approach to community development, particularly how public participation is utilized in the process. Green and Haines (2008) note,

One of the most critical tensions is the role of public participation in place-based efforts. On the one hand, it has been difficult to obtain public participation in local decision making. Residents have few experiences with and face numerous obstacles to participation. On the other hand, governmental officials and professionals often are threatened by public participation when it is successful. The result is a great deal of rhetoric about the importance of participation, which is seldom achieved in practice. (p. 23)

In 1974, Nixon's administration created New Federalism, an attempt to lessen the role of government in community development (Conlan, 1984). Furthermore, this shift in governmental programs replaced 1960s programs and provided more autonomy to states and smaller regions of those states. The development of the various block grants related to community development is an example of this power shift (Conlan, 1984).

In the 1980s, Reagan's administration eliminated much of the autonomy provided to communities by putting the distribution power of grant monies back into states' hands. Clinton's administration's policies focused more on economic development than community development; at this time, foundations such as the Kellogg Foundation and the Ford Foundation were relied upon to help alleviate gaps in financial support of development programs. Also, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Community Development Initiative (RDCI) has worked closely with rural communities to provide more funding for development.

At the turn of the 21st Century, the Bush administration opted to place more emphasis on self-supporting community development efforts. However, the administration failed at an attempt to cut Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding and settled on promoting faith-based initiatives while supporting the notion that community issues are "individual rather than social problems" (Green & Haines, 2008, p. 32). This brief history of community development initiatives exhibits a shifting, and unclear, understanding of the roles of citizens and leaders in the community development process. While today's community development efforts focus on community citizen involvement more so than in the early stages of community development, community leaders still appear to be driving the community development effort, as they generally have more political and social connections than the majority of citizens. Analyzing past

legislation relative to community development, these connections appear necessary for community development to occur.

Today's Community Development

Development of a community does not refer simply to the remodeling of old buildings or advocating and supporting economic growth. Summers (1986) argues that “it is altogether possible that the process of achieving development *in* the community [i.e, economic development] may produce development *of* the community” (p. 356). While community development is inclusive, covering a broad sense of development, the purpose of community development is to promote a better sense of well-being for community citizens. In other words, growth in a community does not always equate to development of that community; certain growth, which could result in “polluted air, overcrowded schools, and traffic congestion” (Flora & Flora, 2008), could do more harm to individuals in a community than good. Green and Haines (2008) note, “the main point...is that development cannot simply be reduced to growth in income or jobs. Instead, it should be view [*sic*] as a much broader process that improves the opportunities and quality of life for individuals” (p. 4). This is where neighborhood associations can come together to ensure that community citizens’ interests are taken into account before development decisions are made.

Ultimately, as Green and Haines (2008) note, community development is “...a planned effort to build assets that increase the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life” (p. 3). Therefore, the goal of community development is to improve the physical and social aspects of a community in the hopes of improving citizens’ lives. While physical capital is certainly an important aspect of basing community development, the social connectivity that can result from a focus on social bonding provides a core element in approaching community development.

Community development approaches vary according to how practitioners view the community in focus. In *Community Development in Perspective*, Christenson (1989) organizes community development approaches according to three themes: self-help, technical assistance, and conflict. The goal of the self-help theme is to assist people in “learning how to handle their own problems” (Christenson, 1989, p. 33), creating a more autonomous community (Flora & Flora, 2008). The self-help theme is devised of “the belief that community development is primarily about helping people to help themselves” (Green & Haines, 2008, p. 16). In this approach, community developers work closely with community citizens to build a community that is self-supporting. This includes a developer, or “change agent” (Christenson, 1989, p. 34), who is fairly neutral in his or her position and whose sole purpose is to help the group work together.

Flora and Flora (2008) note, “development efforts, which depend on existing local leaders as a basis for community organizing, may systematically bias development efforts away from the problems of the least-advantaged citizens” (p. 358) if communities are not careful in their recruitment efforts. All groups of a community should be represented so that development efforts are not exclusive to particular groups and their interests. Green and Haines (2008) state, “development efforts using the self-help approach tend to have more long-lasting effects than do some of the other approaches because residents have greater ownership in the process” (p. 16). The goal of the self-help approach is to mold community citizens into community developers by involving all of them in the development process.

Christenson’s (1989) second approach of practitioners to community development is one of technical assistance. While the technical assistance model “likely has had more lasting impact than the combined efforts of the other two themes” (Christenson, 1989, p. 35), this model is

generally used for specific projects, such as building bridges, because the technicians utilized in leading are generally specialized in the areas of focus. In this model, developers assume the role of consultant, making them “much more concerned with the eventual outcome of the community development effort than they are with the capacity of the residents” (Green & Haines, 2008, p. 16). While community development should be led by someone with knowledge and experience of the community, this approach seems costly, mostly fiscally and socially, depending on the choice of the consultant.

Christenson’s (1989) third theme, categorized by Green and Haines (2008) as “one of the most established traditions in community development,” is the conflict approach (p. 17). In this theme, the developer takes on the role of advocate, assisting community citizens in recognizing their power within their community. The conflict approach agent attempts to work with communities to identify “polarization of groups based on salient issues and stimulates confrontation between opposing sides” (Christenson, 1989, p. 37). According to Green and Haines (2008), maintaining momentum is a weakness with this approach; advocates generally no longer appear needed once community citizens discover they have some power. While this result may seem positive, the negative is that citizens often retreat from the development before their long-lasting power is discovered and stabilized. Furthermore, Green and Haines (2008) note that community leaders are often scrutinized or embarrassed in exchange for citizens’ self-actualization; this may hurt the community’s social development in the long run, especially when citizens lose interest in the development process due to stigmas associated with the approach.

According to the above research, most practitioners agree that community citizens are important elements of community development processes. However, community citizens may feel as if it is not their place to initiate the revamping of their community. Citizens may look to

those in their communities who hold leadership positions to make such changes. Therefore, the direction of the development process depends heavily on the perception of the leader(s) in charge of the development. Commonly, when community leaders and policymakers approach community development or improving community citizens' quality of life, their first reaction is to examine the weaknesses of a community. Whether it is an approach to rectifying poverty or improving lackluster education, most community leaders focus on how to improve these weak areas in their community as a way to develop the community. This is not an uncommon approach.

In their guide to community development, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) note that a typical response of “well-intended people” to revitalizing distressed communities that focuses on “...a community’s needs, deficiencies and problems...” is a commonly followed path (p. 1). Even terminology like poverty, high unemployment, and high illiteracy—often used to describe communities, especially rural communities—are obviously centered on a needs-based approach to community development. Also, most citizens can quickly name a government-sponsored program, whether local, state, or federal, that operates in attempt to rectify a community’s problems. What results from these negative images is what “...can be conceived as kind of a mental ‘map’ of the neighborhood, [which] often [conveys] part of the truth about the actual conditions of a troubled community” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 2). Thus, a stigma that communities find hard to shake is born.

Although these negative labels are not all that a community has, the focus of policymakers inside and outside of the community suggests otherwise. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) even suggest these labels “...are not regarded as part of the truth; they are regarded as the whole truth” (p. 2). Once citizens of a community begin to be part, or the subjects, of charity

work, they may see themselves as charity cases, hence becoming consumers of social services. Therefore, their role of citizen in a community has been reduced substantially. This is what one might consider a “glass half empty,” negative approach to community development.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) term this type of community development approach as a systems-based approach. A systems-based approach, such as welfare reform, education reform, or the like, is one that “...demands clients and consumers” to utilize services and is typical in many American communities (McKnight, 1996, p. 7). Furthermore, the author states,

If one listens carefully to the proposals of our current social policymakers, we can construct a map of the territory where they believe they operate. This territory has two principal areas. The first is a space filled with systems. Policymakers see systems or institutions as the principal tool for the work of society. Therefore, their policies and programs are about "system design," "system planning," "delivery systems" and "system reform." The second area in their map is filled with the individuals who are the object of the systems--clients and consumers. (McKnight, 1996, p. 1)

While this systems-based or client-based approach dominates many American communities, there is an alternative approach that focuses more on the assets a community holds.

Asset-Based Community Development

Organizations and initiatives, such as the USDA’s Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) and community development programs sponsored by the Ford Foundation, have been at the forefront of community development work, especially in rural communities, for years. These organizations and initiatives have proven beneficial to many urban and rural communities, helping to provide assets such as grants and volunteer workers to aid of impoverished communities. For example, the Ford Foundation’s (2010b) overall mission is to

support “visionary leaders and organizations working on the frontlines of social change worldwide” (para. 1). The Ford Foundation (2010a) does this by providing grants that “reduce poverty and injustice and promote democratic values, international cooperation and human achievement” (para. 1). One of the three areas of grants provided by the Ford Foundation (2010a) is one termed “Asset Building and Community Development” (para. 1). This approach to developing communities is similar to another intuitive approach to community development that provides an alternative to past systems-or needs-based approach. This alternative approach is categorized by McKnight (1996) as Asset Building Community Development (ABCD), and it offers community citizens a way to develop their communities from the inside out instead of relying on outside sources for help.

ABCD produces what the McKnight (1996) terms as the associational community, drawing from an 1831 study of American democracy by Alexis de Toqueville. This type of community, one which attempts to engage citizens instead of serving clients and consumers, focuses on the positive attributes of a community instead of the “needs” of a community. Thus, this approach is more optimistic, a “glass half full” viewpoint, so to speak.

Dating back to 1831, French count Alexis de Toqueville described his view of American communities in *Democracy in America*, a book that mapped out his perception of communities’ operations, as communities based on celebrating members of society. Toqueville (1956) asserted,

The citizen of the United States is taught from infancy to rely upon his own exertions, in order to resist the evils and the difficulties of life; he looks upon the social authority with an eye of mistrust and anxiety, and he claims its assistance only when he is unable to do without it. (p. 95)

What Toqueville witnessed in his observations even then were communities that were controlled by the decisions of “...the most common of people—every Tom, Dick and Mary” instead of elected officials based on control and narrowly focused agendas (McKnight, 1996, p. 5). Comparing the American culture to that in Europe, Toqueville (1956) noted that in Europe, those in charge of making community decisions “consider themselves, in some degree, as the legislative and executive council of the people, which is unable to speak for itself; moved by this belief, they act and they command” (p. 100). In other words, “...decisions were made by elected officials, bureaucrats, nobility, professors, doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc.,” the power elite (McKnight, 1996, pp. 4-5). However, American communities were more apt to come “...together in small self-appointed groups to solve problems, create new approaches to production and celebrate the local society” (McKnight, 1996, p. 5). Thus emerged Toqueville’s (1956) label of American communities as “associations” (p. 91). Therefore, this associational community is no new concept and could allow communities an easier return to their past approach to developing American communities.

In rural communities especially, where associations are relatively small and networks may be easier to strengthen, the ABCD approach to community development is viable. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) based their community development theory on the mental “maps” that are associated with communities. As mentioned earlier, when a focus on a community’s development is all negative, so are the mental maps which accompany those images, such as the stereotypes conjured up when names such as South Bronx or South Central Los Angeles are mentioned (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The alternative presented by ABCD is to focus on the positive attributes of a community, leading citizens and even outsiders to see the community differently, more positively. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) assert that

with the construction of this new “map,” “the regenerating community can begin to assemble its strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities for production” (p. 6). This positive approach serves to seep throughout the community, evoking a more positive outlook on the community’s well-being than has been evoked by past development attempts.

One element of criticism that has been applied to ABCD is that in an attempt to focus on positive community assets, the approach may encourage leaders to overlook the needs of a community. However, as Mathie and Cunningham (2002) argue,

...the appeal of ABCD lies in its premise that communities can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilizing existing (but often unrecognized) assets, and thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunity. In particular, ABCD draws attention to social assets: the gifts and talents of individuals, and the social relationships that fuel local associations and informal networks. (para. 1)

In creating local economic and social opportunity through the Asset-Based Community Development approach, communities are expanding the opportunities available to community citizens, opportunities that could have possibly never existed without the positive focus on the existing assets of a community. Morse (2004) notes, “The empowerment of people in solving their own problems is *the* vehicle for civic change and must be the overriding factor as [communities] seek to build and rebuild communities” (p. 17).

This section has discussed the key elements of communities and community development, mainly focusing on the history, implications, and concepts of Asset-Based Community Development. While many approaches to community development may exist, this

study highlights ABCD in an attempt to focus on the role of one particular asset rural communities possess: community leadership.

Community Leadership and Rural Communities

Despite the optimism embedded in an asset-focused approach such as the ABCD approach, the logistics of applying such an approach are not clear in the research surrounding it. The history of determining who is responsible for leading community development begins with a focus on leaders in formal roles. In their review of literature surrounding community leadership, Bonjean and Olson (1964) note that prior to 1953, everyone from social scientists to community citizens believed leaders who held public offices to be responsible for a community's well-being. The authors state,

Those persons occupying important offices—elected political officials, higher civil servants, business executives, officials in voluntary associations, heads of religious groups, leaders of labor unions and others—were assumed to be making key decisions affecting directly or indirectly the lives of most other community residents. (Bonjean & Olson, 1964, p. 279)

Furthermore, these leaders were identified by a positional approach (Bonjean & Olson, 1964). This approach looked at “individuals holding the greatest number and most important offices in the community” (Bonjean & Olson, 1964, p. 281), considering these individuals as key decision makers for the community.

Since the early half of the 20th century, however, other approaches to determining how to categorize community leadership have emerged. For example, a reputational approach had been used to measure community leaders by their social status. Through this approach, community citizens are asked “to name and rank the leaders in their community” (Bonjean & Olson, 1964, p.

283). However, critics of this approach believe that this is a measure of reputation of leadership only and not “a valid index of power” (Bonjean & Olson, 1964, p. 283). Another approach to determining a community’s leaders is the decisional approach. With this approach, leaders are categorized as leaders of a community by a measurement of the leader’s actions “in regard to decision making and policy formation within the context of specific issues” (Bonjean & Olson, 1964, p. 287). However, any one of these particular approaches is criticized if solely used in determining community leaders. The best approach is to use a combination of all three.

Interestingly, despite a century of studies and research related to determining how to categorize a leader in community development, the roles of community leaders and other citizens in the process need further examination to make the application of any community development framework work. In his study focusing on the role of public leaders in community building in an Estonian community, Raagmaa (2001) discovered that “the literature about a public leader’s role in development still seems to be quite scarce” (p. 1040). What is known about community leaders, particularly those in formal leadership positions, is that “the presence of followers and teams is important because one person cannot do much” (Raagmaa, 2001, p. 1052). These leaders also cannot do much when they use their positions as coercive, “influencing others to do something by manipulating the penalties and rewards in their work environment” (Northouse, 2007, p. 8). Leaders who use their positions, and the powers that accompany those positions, to coerce followers are leading in a way that “runs counter to working with followers to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2007, p. 8). Followers are likely to pick up on this coerciveness and lose trust and faith in their leaders. To maintain trust among community citizens, public leaders have a responsibility “to create a common vision, involve new active people and to create his [sic] own ‘school’ of followers that will attain goals defined in the vision” (Raagmaa, 2001, p.

1052). According to Kouzes and Posner (2002), “People first follow the person, then the plan” (p. 15). If citizens lose trust in their leaders, then the plan is likely to be lost as well.

A community cannot rely solely on one asset of the community, such as the community’s leaders, in empowering it. As Ludlow, Keramidas, and Kossar (2008) note, “Rural areas of the U. S. have not fully participated in the rapid growth of personal income and prosperity over the last several decades” (para. 12). As a result, rural communities have not been privy to many development opportunities that larger communities have, particularly relating to population growth and diversity. In their study, Miller and Tuttle (2007) assert:

A key for the vitality of a rural community is the ability to identify the social engines that drive the community--not just economically, but in terms of interactions and community engagement. In many rural communities, particularly those that are farm based, there are few, if any, social engines....In some communities, the social engine could well be something with more size and strength in engaging the community. (p. 118)

Perhaps an overlooked social engine of a community is the group that comprises the community’s leadership.

In relation to Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), Kretzmann and McKnight (2005) contend that an important part of the mapping approach is focusing on a community’s assets. The authors note, “Every community has an array of local public, private and non-profit institutions. Each of these institutions has resources – such as personnel, space, expertise, equipment, and economic power” upon which to base the ABCD approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 2005, p. 9). A focus on the involvement of personnel in a community’s organizations will address the development of the community in both the social organizations and the social interaction within the community. The people who drive a community’s social engines and

interactions could aid in inspiring generations of active citizens and future community development proponents in terms of active community leaders. First, however, leaders from these community organizations have to be committed to the ABCD approach and work collaboratively to apply it in their communities.

The term leadership is used to describe individuals who assume an active role in leading a group towards a common goal. Garkovich (1989) states, “Leadership involves...both the ability to organize and sustain task performance and the ability to arouse or stimulate others to join in the task” (p. 203). This definition is fitting to those involved in community development as they serve in the capacity to motivate fellow community citizens to become active participants, maybe even leaders, in the process. Garkovich (1989) further discusses the theoretical approach embedded in community leadership. The author notes,

The situational-contingency approach best fits the social action model of community development. The situational-contingency theory proposed that leadership emerges from the interaction of individual leader traits or behaviors with the characteristics of other persons and within a particular situation. In other words, the effectiveness of leadership is a function of its fit with the situation in which it occurs. (Garkovich, 1989, p. 203)

In the case of community leaders, their effectiveness in motivating community citizens is a determinant of their success in a community development approach. However, a determinant in leaders’ motivation is how well the leader fits into the community as a member of that community, not just an individual with a leadership position. Kirk and Shutte (2004) note,

...most current theory looks at leadership as a process in which leaders are not seen as individuals in charge of followers, but as members of a community of practice. A community of practice is defined by Drath and Palus (1994, p. 4) as people united in a

common enterprise who also share a history and thus certain values, beliefs, ways of talking and ways of doing things. (p. 236)

Community organizational leaders fit into this mold and are crucial in working towards a strong community of practice, one which is focused on developing the social strengths of the community that their organizations serve.

One way that Kirk and Shutte (2004) observe leaders participating in this type of community development activity is that these leaders have, in the last several years, "...found themselves working in a range of different partnership arrangements with other organizations" (p. 236). Therefore, typical roles of college administrator or city mayor are further extended to role of community developer. Kirk and Shutte (2004) describe organizations in which this type of leadership can occur as having "...permeable organizational boundaries, which place a premium on working collaboratively with diversity..." (p. 237). Furthermore, Kirk and Shutte (2004) argue that these leaders must be engaged in a process that involves continuous learning that will hopefully open leaders' eyes to their extended role, one beyond the role of providing leadership in an organization. The authors note, "It is this capacity to see differently that holds the prospect of beneficial social change" (Kirk & Shutte, 2004, p. 238). Upon recognizing this additional role, community leaders can then work collaboratively with each other to employ the Asset-Based Community Development or similar process.

Although policymakers and leaders in communities can work counterintuitively in attempting to develop their communities by only focusing on their communities' weaknesses, these leaders still have an important role in shaping the attitudes of their community citizens and the stigmas associated with their communities. By focusing on the strengths—the *assets*—of the their communities, leaders within the community have a vital role in setting the stage for a more

positive focus on community development. Community leaders are vital in establishing and influencing this perception, especially in the process of community development where trust is being developed through relationship building among all citizens.

In their study about ethics involved in community leadership, Rude, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Comerford (2005) further support the notion that leaders provide the mental framework of community development. While their study focuses on school leadership, their assertions are applicable to community leaders just as well. The authors state,

Leaders who are successful...identify and articulate strong values and ideals that motivate others to support ideals for the greater good that extend beyond self-interest. The most tangible evidence of this phenomenon is the ability to identify a clear and elevating vision of future success and conditions that motivate and inspire organizational members to embrace a shared vision of the future (Rude, 2002). Leaders who stimulate intellectual curiosity while simultaneously attending to individualized considerations of organizational members typically achieve results that extend beyond the expectations of the individuals. (Rude, Paolucci-Whitcomb & Comerford, 2005, para. 20)

If community leaders can collaborate with citizens and other community leaders, then a shared responsibility for Asset-Based Community Development may emerge. As a result, a more collaborative, associational community is taking the right steps towards its development.

This section has examined the role of community leaders, historically and today, in their organizations and in their communities. A new era, or at least a new mindset, of leaders is needed, leaders who reach beyond their organizations' walls and situate their organizations positively in building their local community. These leaders must be aware of their community responsibility and work closely with other community leaders to engage in Asset-Based

Community Development. However, research covering these leaders' collaboration with other organizational leaders, including citizens, in the community development process is minimal. Further studies concerning this collaboration are needed if a positive approach to community development is possible.

Adult Education in Rural Communities

The education of rural community citizens has a strong influence on positive community development. In their discussion of rural community citizens as major assets, or human capital of a community, Flora and Flora (2008) state that "education and training are the most important forms of human capital" (p. 85). Citizens who are educated and experienced can strengthen a community by sharing their knowledge with one another. Flora and Flora (2008) further discuss the term "education" by stressing that formal education is not the only education to which they refer: "One also suspects that economist and sociologists have focused on formal education because level of education is easy to measure and the data are accessible. But equally important are learning skills and gaining knowledge through experience," such as community development involvement (p. 85).

According to Merriam and Brockett (1997), adult education is delivered through three categories or systems: formal, nonformal, and informal. The authors describe formal adult education as,

that which is institutionalized, usually as part of an existing system. Continuing higher education, vocational and technical school, literacy programs attached to public schools, and government training programs are a few examples. Formal adult education is most often supported by public funds and thus contributes to carrying out the state's goals. (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 169)

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) believe that these formal institutes of learning are critical to the community development effort. The authors state, “creative educators and innovative community builders must now begin to work together to discover new ways to mobilize the many and varied resources of local schools as essential components of on-going community development efforts” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 210). Therefore, leaders of a community’s sources of formal education such as superintendents and principals have a key role in promoting community development efforts.

Merriam and Brockett (1997) also discuss nonformal adult education and its relation to community development, stating that it,

takes place outside the formal system; typically, it is less structured, more flexible, and more responsive to localized needs. It also is expressly concerned with social inequities and often seeks to raise the consciousness of participants toward social action.

Community-based development projects and popular education characterize much nonformal adult education. (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, pp. 169-170)

However, several researchers agree that nonformal education is not any more successful at promoting citizen empowerment and mobility than formal education (Bock & Bock, 1989; Coombs, 1985). Both systems are important in promoting change, as are the leaders of these civic organizations and community development groups, but the most influential type of learning in community development efforts occurs through informal adult education.

Informal adult education “is learning that occurs naturally within the context of people’s lives” (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 171). This type of learning can take place anywhere and at any time; examples include a conversation with a friend, a newspaper, or an Internet search. This unstructured type of learning is believed to be the most prolific of the three systems (Bock &

Bock, 1989; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Spaulding, 1987). This third category of adult education places the responsibility on every citizen to become a leader in community development efforts and focus on the assets and needs within the community because there are no bounds to who may be involved other than the community's geographical bounds themselves.

Adult learning is a key component of community development. According to Hill and Moore (2000), "adult education and community development together possess theories and skills that can be used to facilitate examination of the factors affecting rural communities and to empower people to address social change" (p. 345). As a result of globalism and technological advances, rural communities are affected by economic growth and change now more than ever, and rural citizens are often pushed aside in growth both economically and socially by their urban neighbors. As a result, Hill and Moore (2000) contend,

Given the diversity of rural communities, changes in their economic base, and changes in the character of rural dwellers caused by their growing participation in suburban culture, it is incumbent on adult education and community development practitioners to invest energy in learning about the specific communities they serve. (p. 346)

Community citizens who focus on their individual communities are taking part in a community development process that is informal and community-oriented. Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) Asset-Based Community Development is an example of a community-oriented approach and one that community leaders could employ to effect a more knowledgeable and involved citizenry. Hill and Moore (2000) state that visits and observations of communities, including extensive dialogue with residents about their community, could yield "a more holistic and critical perspective" of what development efforts are needed in the community (p. 355). To understand rural communities and their development efforts, Hill and Moore (2000) suggest a narrower

focus on individual communities, an idea that is highlighted in Asset-Based Community Development literature.

Need for Study

While the concept of community leadership serving as direct avenues for community development is not a new one, little research exists on what role these leaders—both in public and private organizations in the community—play in this development and learning process. For example, as Zacharis, Devin, and Miller (2008) point out, “The research on the relationship between schools and rural development is almost nonexistent and the available research lacks creativity, failing to investigate the role schools play outside of educating youth” (para. 10). There exists relatively little literature related to exploring how community leaders perceive their roles in community development approaches such as the Asset-Based Community Development.

A study examining these roles is necessary to draw attention to the importance of perceptions and actions of community leaders in a positive community development process. As noted by Ewert and Grace (2000), an examination of “the structures of power, privilege, and voice” coupled with leaders who “develop trust, build relationships, and encourage participation” ultimately reveal “the dynamism of adult learning, and build sustainable and self-renewing communities” (p. 341). Utilizing Asset-Based Community Development as a key community development approach stimulates a positive and lasting focus on rebuilding communities. However, in their study analyzing ABCD, Mathie and Cunningham (2002) state, “...it is important to remember that ABCD is not done to communities by ABCD experts. Kretzmann and McKnight's work on ABCD evolved from initiatives that occurred spontaneously in communities and municipalities experimenting with different strategies for change” (para. 53). Therefore, perceptions of various types of community leaders were examined in this study. The

ABCD approach serves as a positive step that could influence a much-needed collaboration between rural community leaders and citizens, inspire a desire in citizens to seek more education on various levels, and encourage involvement of rural community citizens in developing their communities.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has reviewed the key elements of literature surrounding a study on rural community development and the roles leaders in those communities play in that development. The first section introduced the study and its purpose, which is to examine the perceptions of community leaders in the development of a rural south Georgia community. Criteria used for research, as well as search terms and modes of research, were described. The second section of this chapter presented an overview of the term community, its perceived definitions and its textbook definitions, and how communities are viewed in America. A sub-section of this section included a focus on rural communities as is the focus of this study. This focus on rural communities aids the reader in developing a better understanding for the necessity of community development in rural areas.

Section three of this chapter examined community development, distinguishing it from economic development and defining it in terms of social interaction and civic engagement of citizens. A specific focus on Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) helped set the conceptual framework for this study. While not many communities have used the ABCD approach per se, as evident in the few examples presented in this chapter, the concept of an asset-based approach to community development is prolific in current community development literature. A fourth section of this chapter focused on leadership in American communities, defining the roles of community leaders in community engagement. A subsection of section three

looked specifically at rural community leaders and their roles. Community leaders and other citizens are seeking a way to redirect their energy from the weaknesses of their communities to their communities' strengths; therefore, the emergence of communities' utilizing asset-based approaches like ABCD is likely to dominate future research in American community development.

The final section of this chapter discussed adult education and its connection to community development. Three types of adult education—formal, nonformal, and informal—were defined, and examples of each type of adult learning opportunity were provided. All three forms of adult education opportunities are essential in community development efforts.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Community, the promise that a gathering of the spirit can both create and change culture. In the desert, change is nurtured even in stone by wind, by water, through time. – Terry Tempest

Williams

The purpose of this bounded case study was to explore how rural leaders experience rural community development and to understand the perceptions of community leaders in identifying and promoting community assets, including human assets and learning opportunities. Research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do community leaders experience rural community development?
2. What roles do community leaders play in creating a learning environment through rural community development?
3. How do rural community leaders define assets, specifically human assets and learning opportunities, within this rural south Georgia community?
4. In what ways do community leaders utilize assets in community development activities?

This study examined how rural community leaders view and utilize their roles as community leaders in the community development process.

This chapter introduces qualitative research as it applies to this study and justifies why it fits the study of rural community leaders and their roles in community development. This chapter begins with a basic definition of qualitative research. The methodology of a bounded case study approach is also explained. Next, this chapter looks at the method of data collection—interviews—and its relevance to this study’s research questions. Lastly, the validity and reliability of the study is examined with an inclusion of the researcher’s subjectivity as it relates to the case study.

Design of the Study

This study’s purpose was to understand community leaders’ roles and how the leaders define assets in their community. The goal of the research conducted was to understand individuals and their interactions with their world. Researchers who seek to reach this goal are typically applying qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). While surveys could have been conducted and statistical analysis could have produced interesting data as to how rural community leaders view their roles in community development, the ultimate goal of this study was to examine leaders’ perceptions of their roles, what constitutes community development, and what assets their community houses. Therefore, a qualitative approach served this study best.

According to Merriam (2009), researchers engaging in qualitative research “are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). These elements of meaning, interpretation, and construction are necessary to this study and would not occur with a more structured, guided, and measurable methodology such as with quantitative research. In other words, in data collection and analysis, themes may emerge from a qualitative approach that a quantitative approach may have stifled in its rigidity.

Several characteristics of qualitative research make qualitative research design appropriate for this study, and these will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. According to Creswell (2003), qualitative research “takes place in the natural setting” (p. 181), which is the method of data collection that will be employed with this study. Qualitative researchers also use “multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic” (Creswell, 2003, p. 181). The sensitivity and confidentiality of participants was acknowledged and accounted for during the research process.

Creswell (2003) also notes that qualitative research “is emergent rather than tightly prefigured” (p. 181). Original notions of how the research process may unfold are subject to change throughout data collection. Once qualitative research data are collected, the results become “fundamentally interpretive” (Creswell, 2003, p. 182). My subjectivity is acknowledged in this chapter; however, maintaining complete objectivity as a lens for interpreting data was impossible.

Qualitative research also encourages researchers to view “social phenomena holistically” (Creswell, 2003, p. 183). This may result in data analysis that introduces new themes and ideas not discussed in Chapter 2 and also may result in findings that are complex and all-encompassing. Qualitative research asks a researcher to reflect “on who he or she is in the inquiry” and be “sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 182). Again, my subjectivity was a factor in how the participants reacted in the data collection stage and how I interpreted the data during the analysis stage.

Creswell (2003) notes that qualitative research forces the researcher to use “complex reasoning that is multifaceted, iterative, and simultaneous” (p. 182). In data analysis, a researcher begins the analysis stage as soon as the data collection stage begins. Then the researcher

continues this analysis throughout the collection stage and revisits data periodically throughout interpretation. Creswell's (2003) last criterion for qualitative research is that it encourages the researcher to adopt and use "one or more strategies of inquiry as a guide for the procedures in the qualitative study" (p. 183). Initially, as is the case in this study, a beginning researcher may use one procedure in order to conduct a study, referring to textbooks and guidebooks for how to approach a study. Such was this case with this qualitative study.

In this study, the context of the rural community provided rich data on how leaders perceive their roles in community development process since rural communities are relatively small and social networks seem easier to establish and maintain than in larger communities (Snow, 2001a). In order to understand rural communities, a researcher may decide to conduct an in-depth study of examples of that particular group of people in that setting, as the case with this study as well. This type of qualitative study is referred to as a case study. Merriam (2002) defines a case study as "an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual group, institution, or community" (p. 8). The purpose of a case study is to examine participants—individuals or groups—in hopes of deducting certain conclusions about those participants in general. According to Yin (2003), case studies are an appropriate research approach or design "when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p. 1). Since community development is the focus of this study, a case study of rural leaders' perceptions of their roles in community development constitutes as a focus on the real-world challenge of developing a rural community and hopefully contributes much to the phenomena involved in leadership in rural communities.

Furthermore, Stake (2005) notes of choosing a phenomenon to study that if an author is "moved to study it, the case is almost certainly going to be a functioning body" (p. 444), or a

bounded system. Merriam (2009) describes a bounded system as “a single entity” of focus, “a unit around which there are no boundaries” (p. 40). The one unit of analysis of this case study was its focus on a particular rural community in south Georgia and a particular group of individuals within that community. Stake (2005) further notes, “boundedness and activity patterns...are useful concepts for specifying the case” (p. 444), and this notion will guide the research questions and participant choices of the study.

In alignment with Creswell’s (2003) characteristics of qualitative research and Stake’s (2005) definition of a bounded case study, the data of this particular study were gathered through a series of interviews with rural community leaders. These interviews were conducted in the context of the interviewees’ environments in relation to community leadership. For example, the interview with the college dean took place on the college campus while the interview with a community leader such as the mayor took place at the mayor’s office. As Creswell (2003) notes, this use of familiar territory “enables the researcher to develop a level of detail about the individual or place and...be highly involved in actual experiences of the participants” (p. 181). Furthermore, the interactive, conversational method of interviews were employed in this study.

While a quantitative approach to research is guided, a qualitative approach allows the research questions to “change and be refined as the inquirer learns what to ask and to whom it should be asked” (Creswell, 2003, p. 181). Although qualitative researchers typically prepare a set of questions to cover during an interview, the direction of the interview may change throughout the conversation. Likewise, while a researcher certainly has preconceived expectations of an experience, the researcher’s actual experience may be nothing like his or her expectations. This is necessary in qualitative research, as this may allow unexpected themes to emerge and become useful data.

Sample Selection

The sample selection for this study was determined by the participants' positional power, or formal power, related to their community leadership roles. An asset-based approach to community development would involve community citizens without positional power as asset-based approaches argue that these citizens are just as valuable in development as those with formal power. Typically, especially in rural communities where citizen isolation is embedded, community leaders in traditional power roles are expected to lead community development efforts; therefore, these leaders are expected to work closely with all citizens and see them as equitable assets in a community's development. Later studies could examine community members, but for the purpose of this study, community leaders' perceptions in asset-based community development needed first to be the focus of a study, as is represented in the research questions that guided this study.

In qualitative research, a sample consists of participants that represent the entire group being studied (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). In this study, the leaders in this rural south Georgia community were chosen to be representative of leaders of other rural communities with similar characteristics. As with most rural communities, the community that is the focus of this study contains positional leaders in the forms of educational leaders, elected officials, and civic organizational leaders. Although broad, these groups encompass various types of community leaders who have access to community assets through their community connection. Therefore, participants were chosen based on these groups. This constitutes the concept of purposeful sampling.

Purposeful sampling ensures the researcher chooses participants based on criteria that align with the research questions of the study (Ezzy, 2002). With this study, participants are

community leaders, defined as those who hold positional or formal power and work with citizens in the community. For example, an educational institution's leaders, whether dean, superintendent, or principal, constitute as community leaders in that they hold positional power and the access to recruiting community citizens through their line of work. For the purposes of this bounded case study, all community leaders were not interviewed, but several leaders within each group of positional leaders listed above were represented. These leaders were chosen from the three most influential groups of the community—educational institutions, elected officials, and leaders of civic organizations. Because the community is small and, therefore, these groups are small, the top three leaders—those who hold the most authority to make decisions, access community funds and other resources, and effect change related to community development—of each influential group were asked to participate in interviews for this study. For example, in the educational group, the superintendent of the public school was the obvious choice as a participant while the Chamber of Commerce President was fitting from the civic organizations group.

Within the realm of purposeful sampling, I also employed what Merriam (2009) refers to as a “snowball, chain, or network sampling” approach to choosing some of my participants:

This strategy involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria [the research has] established for participation in the study. As [researchers] interview these early key participants [the researcher asks] each one to refer [the researcher] to other participants. (p. 79)

During their interviews, initial participants were asked to name key players in their community's development efforts. The names I received from the first few participants helped determine four participants for this study.

As is a tenet of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach to community development developed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), I employed a “mapping” technique in order to choose participants of this study (see Appendix A). Leadership groups—educational leaders, business leaders, elected officials, and civic organizational leaders—were first outlined as the community’s assets were examined. Beneath these groups, entities were listed such as the schools (both K-12 and post-secondary), elected offices, and civic groups. Then individuals in the highest leadership positions of each of these entities and groups were chosen as participants. For example, the school superintendent was an obvious choice for representation of the public school system since his position covers the leadership of citizens connected to all of the schools in the community. Overall, 12 participants were chosen for this study. This number was decided upon the point that I reached data saturation. Participants included the local college satellite campus director (who is also the Rotary Club president), the public school superintendent, a mayor, two county commissioners, the Chamber of Commerce president, the Development Authority president, the Arts and Historical Society president, and four participants who were recommended as key players in the community’s development efforts.

Data Collection

To meet the purpose of this study, which was to understand the perceptions of rural leaders in community development, the method of data collection employed was research interviews. In qualitative research, research interviews provide rich data because they allow the researcher “to develop rapport” with participants “and gain the widest range of data” for the study (Merriam & Simpson, 1984, p. 71). The participants of this study hold formal positional power, a power that I, the researcher, do not hold. Therefore, I had to build a relationship of trust

with participants to ensure that quality data were acquired through the interview process. The differences of power between the researcher and the participants make the establishment of trust crucial to the data collection stage of the study. Therefore, interviews were scheduled and conducted cautiously, and interview questions were designed with power differences in mind. I scheduled interviews with participants when and where the interview was convenient for them. When possible, the interviews took place during work hours at a location that was conducive to the participant's leadership position. Also, interview questions, particularly follow-up questions, were adjusted to fit the participant's position. For example, references to the education system of the County were used in interviews with the superintendent.

Interviews provide a level of data that other methods of data collection cannot provide. Researchers who use interviewing as the technique for data collection "can obtain information participants would reveal in no other way" (Merriam & Simpson, 1984, p. 153). Typically, the job of the researcher is to listen during the interview (Charmaz, 2006). In this study, interviews were the only method of data collection that could delve deeply into participants' perceptions of their roles as community leaders and allow me to *hear* their stories. A survey or an observation of these leaders would not have met the purpose of this study, nor would either method have provided an in-depth look at how these leaders' perceptions influence community development. As Ezzy (2002) notes, "the aim of a good in-depth interview is to obtain the...interpretation of the person being interviewed" (p. 68). Thus, interviews were the best source of data collection for this study.

For the purpose of this study, however, an interview that just provides information or a story would not suffice in answering the research questions of this study. Therefore, an intensive interview method was applied during the data collection process. Compared to the basic

definition of an interview, the description of an intensive interview method allows the researcher and participant to take their conversation to a deeper level, permitting “an in-depth exploration of a particular topic with a person who has had the relevant experiences” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). Community leaders utilize their leadership roles in the community development process but may never verbalize what those roles are. Thus, the intensive interview asks a participant “to describe and reflect upon his or her experiences in ways that seldom occur in everyday life” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). Furthermore, in an intensive interview, the researcher’s role branches beyond just intense listener to a researcher seeking to understand participant responses during the process for possible early data analysis. Also, the structure of an intensive interview is not specifically set, allowing it to “range from a loosely guided exploration of topics to semi-structured focused questions” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26). This allows the researcher and the participant to engage in more of a conversation than a structured interview. This could aid in developing trust between the two parties (Charmaz, 2006).

To begin the process, the interviews were arranged and conducted based on the participants’ schedules and preferences. Each participant signed a consent form (see Appendix B) and received a copy for their records. Each participant was then given a pseudonym to protect identities and maintain confidentiality. I conducted only one interview a week, allowing time for transcription, a basic understanding, and an initial validation to occur. All of these interviews were be face-to-face interviews, and I used a digital recorder to use for later transcription of the interview. Each participant was interviewed once. See Appendix C for the interview protocol.

Once interviews were conducted and transcribed, I stored the digital recorder in a locked filing cabinet and ensured the Microsoft Word transcriptions were password protected to

maintain confidentiality. I deleted both the transcription files and the digitally recorded files immediately after the completion of this study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis stage for this study began as soon as the first interview began. As noted, the intensive interview process allows the researcher to be a good listener, but the process also requires the researcher to understand what data are being presented during the process. A characteristic of intensive interviewing is the ability of the researcher “to stop and explore a statement or topic” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26). This is one of the initial steps of analyzing the data presented during the collection stage.

To ensure that data were not lost during the collection and analysis stages, I employed “an inductive method for building theory and interpretation from the perspective of the people being studied” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 61) during the interview process. This method not only allowed me to begin analysis early in the process but also gave the data analysis a chance “to be shaped by the participants in a more fundamental way than if analysis is left until after the data collection has been finished” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 61). The integration of data collection and analysis aided in validating the results of the study. Themes or categories that emerged during the interviews and the transcriptions were coded using a Microsoft Word table (See Appendix D). Themes or categories were noted in the transcriptions to match the categories specified in the spreadsheet. As Ezzy (2002) notes, “theory will emerge through this coding process. Coding links the data to an emergent theory” (p. 86). These early steps of analysis aided in the comparison of all interviews once the data was ready to be interpreted.

Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, the four stages of the constant comparative analysis technique were used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first step involves

coding the data into “tentative categories and/or properties” (Merriam & Simpson, 1984, p. 116), depending on themes that emerge throughout an interview. Several themes related to the research question emerged throughout this study, and these were organized in a table using Microsoft Word (see Appendix D) and color coded on the actual transcriptions. Notations of recurring themes were made to help with validity and with reaching saturation. I began to write memos at this stage of the analysis process, recording what Merriam and Simpson (1984) term “insights that occurred during the comparison of incidents” (p. 116). These memos aided in carrying out the second step of the technique, which was to make sense of the categories and the incidents from which they emerged. I chose categories based on their levels of saturation and relevance to a developing theory from the existing memos. The last stage required me to write the results or findings portion of the study using the data collected, organized, coded, and analyzed.

Trustworthiness

As noted, data analysis began as soon as the intensive interview process began. This analysis approach aided me in ensuring trustworthiness of the study, as I was able to stop and ask the participant questions to guarantee understanding of the data being given. I used Ezzy’s (2002) technique of asking interview participants to verify that I understood the data at the end of an interview. This initial stage of checking with participants helped in validating the analysis.

I took several steps to ensure trustworthiness in this study. First, the methodology behind this study was valid for its purpose in that a quantitative study would not provide data as close to reality as research can be (Merriam & Simpson, 1984). I chose a qualitative methodology so that the participants’ realities could be constructed during the interview process, and I interpreted those realities using triangulation, or “comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means” (Patton, 2001, p. 559). These

various means of data analysis and constant comparison included member checks, thick description, and audit trails.

Member checks were employed throughout the entire data collection process, beginning with checks immediately following interviews and running through the stages of analysis and theorizing. Some of these checks were in the forms of interview transcript clarifications via phone calls, and some took place in face-to-face follow-up meetings. Besides the initial check following the interview, I used one more member check in the form of a memo of my “tentative interpretations,” which emerged from my transcribed interviews (Merriam & Simpson, 1984, p. 102). (See Appendix E.)

Furthermore, these memos and results were written using a method of thick description. To help readers connect with the study, its participants, and its findings, I provided “enough information/description so that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam & Simpson, 1984, p. 103). Rich description of the case study and the participants are presented before any data from interviews is shared with readers, helping readers of the results “understand and draw their own interpretations” from the study (Patton, 1990, p. 375).

The combination of memos, transcriptions, and thick description help further validate the study by providing an audit trail of data. An audit trail “describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2009, p. 222). In addition to earlier sections of this chapter that describe how data were collected, the results/findings chapter of this study covers each of these tenets of an audit trail. Furthermore, memos provide documentation that constant analysis of the data occurred throughout the process. As noted by Patton (2001), “triangulation strengthens a study by

combining methods” (p. 247). Collectively, these methods aided in data triangulation and trustworthiness of the overall findings.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

A human being cannot approach a scenario or a study entirely objectively. However, to add validity to a study, as a qualitative researcher, I should be aware of this before a study begins and, as a result, note biases and assumptions of the study. Qualitative research has been criticized in research communities for being too subjective since “the researcher is the instrument of both data collection and data interpretation” (Patton, 1990, p. 54). However, as Patton (1990) notes, even studies that use quantitative approaches still possess an embedded human interaction through the development of an instrument used to retrieve results. Therefore, neither methodology can be influenced entirely one way—objective or subjective. Therefore, a researcher can share his or her biases and assumptions before data collection, ending up with “a stance of *neutrality* [italics in original] with regard to the phenomenon under study” and proving “the investigator’s commitment...to be balanced” (Patton, 1990, p. 55).

First, I chose this particular community as a case study because I have lived in this community for over 20 years and was interested in understanding community leaders’ roles in developing the community in a greater sense than just what I have observed over the years. I have seen various approaches to community leadership, especially in how these leaders utilize or do not utilize community assets for development, so the study is one that I found necessary on a personal level—both for my understanding and possibly for the future benefit of my community, depending on the results. My personal connection to the study was only used in guaranteeing I remained loyal to the purpose of the study and passionate about seeking answers to the research

questions. Furthermore, this loyalty and passion helped to ensure that I asked questions related to current community leaders and their actions and was keenly listening to participants' responses.

A second bias or assumption I had is based on the close-knit social network typical of a rural community. Since I know many of the participants, many of them openly conversed with me because of my insider status (as a member of the community). Some, however, acted withdrawn because of my outsider status (as not a community leader). However, through allowing the participants to choose locations where interviews would take place, I believe the participants felt comfortable enough to answer questions honestly and openly.

My final assumption was one related to how assets are defined in research related to community development. Crucial assets to community building are a community's citizens (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993); however, often times, citizens are overlooked in aiding the community's development as community leaders often search for assets beyond the community. As a citizen of this community and one who deeply cares about the resourcefulness of the community and its leaders, I worked hard to shake the personal resentment often caused by such leadership decisions and focus on my role as researcher for the purpose of this study.

Summary

This chapter has presented and examined the methodology employed in this study on community leaders and community development. By first reviewing the design of the study and then explaining the sample selection, I have explained the initial steps taken in conducting the study. Next, methods of data collection and data analysis were explained in order to aid the reader in further description of the intent of the study. Lastly, elements of validity and reliability and my biases and assumptions were explored for the purposes of adding credibility to the study and me.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life. – Jane Addams

Introduction

The purpose of this bounded case study was to explore how rural leaders experience rural community development and to understand the perceptions of community leaders in identifying and promoting community assets, including human assets and learning opportunities. Research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do community leaders experience rural community development?
2. What roles do community leaders play in creating a learning environment through rural community development?
3. How do rural community leaders define assets, specifically human assets and learning opportunities, within this rural south Georgia community?
4. In what ways do community leaders utilize assets in community development activities?

This qualitative bounded case study was bounded in a particular rural south Georgia county. This study examined how that rural county's community leaders view and utilize their roles as community leaders in the community development process.

This study was guided by a qualitative research design. Interviews involving 12 community leaders of a rural south Georgia community were conducted, transcribed, analyzed, and coded for themes based on their responses. A purposeful sample selection, including a snowball method, was used to determine participants for this bounded case study. Eight of these community leaders were chosen based on their positional leadership roles (i.e., mayor, superintendent of schools, etc.); the other 4 participants were recommended by the first 8 community leaders as stand-out leaders in community development efforts of the rural community although they hold no formal leadership position.

This chapter begins with an overview of the demographics of the community that is the focus of this study. Next, an overview of the participants' roles in the community, including their employment positions and informal involvement in developing the community, are presented. This overview is presented in alphabetical order according to pseudonyms chosen by either the participant or me, the researcher. Next, I present the research findings, including excerpts from the interviews conducted.

Overview of the Community

The rural community that is the focus of this study is situated between the middle and southeast regions of Georgia. According to United States Census Bureau reports in November 2010, the community is comprised of just under 12,800 residents. This number is an increase of approximately 1,000 residents since 2000 (Georgia Department of Community Affairs, 2006). Racially, these residents are categorized as the following approximates: 58 percent White, 41 percent Black, and 1 percent of other races (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Compared to a state average of 17.4 percent, 33 percent of residents fall below the poverty line. In terms of education, residents fall significantly below the state average for people holding high school

diplomas and bachelor’s degrees, separately. Georgians have a 78.6 percent high school graduation rate compared to this County’s 63.6 percent. Georgians with bachelor’s degrees total 24.3 percent compared to this County’s 8.3 percent.

Participants

At the start of this research project, I identified key community leaders based on their formal leadership positions in the community. Because the community is small, very few community leadership positions exist. For example, the public school system is comprised of one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. There is also only one school superintendent for the county; because the school system is an example of a learning opportunity for community citizens, the superintendent was a first choice as a participant. Secondly, the Chamber of Commerce and the Development Authority were also apparent choices of entities responsible for community development, so the leaders of those organizations were also obvious examples. The last 4 participants were recommended using a snowball effect, with the initial participants recommending these community leaders of both formal and informal leadership positions.

Table 4.1 Overview of Participants

Name	Gender	Race	Main Leadership Role(s)	Years in Role(s)	Years as Resident in County
Al	Male	White	Dean, Satellite Campus of Technical College	6 years	0 years
Andy	Male	White	Board of Commissioners	2 years	23 years
Ashley	Male	White	Chairman, Development Authority/ Owner, Insurance Company	41	41

Fran	Female	White	President, Arts and Historical Society	8	48
Jane	Female	White	Manager, Admin. Services for Electric Company	26	36
John	Male	White	Superintendent of Schools	3 months	29
Mack	Male	Black	Retired from BOE/Chairman, Health Zoning Committee/Dev. Authority Member	11 4 ~35	74
Nancy	Female	White	Mayor, County Seat	3	72
Olan	Male	White	Chairman, Board of Commissioners	2 years	70 ½
Ronnie	Male	White	Vice President, Major Bank in County/Economic Development Authority/Joint Dev. Authority	10	40
Rose	Female	White	Chamber of Commerce President	3	19
Terry	Male	White	President, Major Bank in County	6	“Lifetime Resident”

Al

Al serves as the dean of the satellite campus of a local technical college. Al has held this position for six years. In his role, he oversees the operations of the technical college campus, such as supervising employees and analyzing the community for needed programs, such as GED classes and technical programs. He sees his role as one that allows him “to support...in any way [he] can.” He also recently accepted the role as president of the County’s Rotary Club. Unlike the other participants, Al does not reside in the County, nor has he ever resided in the County. He described the County as having “tremendous potential,” especially young people in the community who have gotten involved in community leadership through entities like the Rotary

Club. Al stated that “the weakest link [of the community] is business and industry.” He explained that businesses and industries do not do all that they could to help in developing the community.

Andy

Andy grew up in the County. At age 18, he decided to leave in order to pursue more opportunities for himself. He served 24 years in the military. Finally, after 36 years of living away from the County, he returned and has been a resident for 5 years. Since returning, he has served his district for 2 years on the Board of County Commissioners. He was inspired to become involved in community development through this leadership position because he noticed a decline in opportunities in the County during his absence. He considers the County “a special place.”

Ashley

Ashley owns an insurance company in the County, but his main role as a community leader is as the Chairman of the Development Authority. He feels this position also helps him serve as a liaison with the County commissioners. In his description of his community, he discussed with nostalgia a time when the County had “a single commissioner” instead of an entire board like today. He stated that they usually end a discussion in a “3:2 vote” after much deliberation. His focus in defining community development is revenue related, associating development issues with funding problems, including low tax money collection. He has lived in the County and been involved in community development in the County for 41 years.

Fran

Fran describes herself as having always been involved in community development in some capacity, either by working at a local nursing home for 22 years before retiring or

participating in some type of community development project. She is currently involved in the Lyon's Club and the Eastern Star, and she volunteers at the local library several days a week. She also holds the role as president of the arts and historical society, and she has been in this role 8 years. She states that she "has always lived in rural towns," and she believes she is "small-town oriented." She loves that people care about one another and that they generally work together. She says of her community development efforts that she tries "to be aware, concerned" about what's going on in her community. She expressed frustration with citizen participation at times, and she referred to several projects where community turnout was not as remarkable as she expected it to be. She feels like low turnout is a result of past projects that have not been successful: "It's convincing people that things are going to get done or going to happen" that's the changing factor.

Jane

Jane feels she is considered a community leader by her peers by default. She has worked for the local electrical company as the manager of administrative services for 26 years, and she feels her job duties push her to be as active as she is with community development projects. Her place of employment places a lot of emphasis on economic development, and her job provides her the opportunity not only to recruit businesses to come to the community but also to work with citizens on projects that she and the citizens feel are important to the growth of the community. When asked to describe her community, she labeled it as "destitute" and stressed the importance of everyone working together to make improvements. She has lived in the County for 36 years.

John

John is the County's school superintendent. John is new to the position, having been in office only two months at the time of the interview. Before that, he was an attorney, then taught government and politics at the local high school, and then served as assistant principal. John described his community as "high poverty," with 80% of children enrolled in schools receiving free or reduced lunch. He sees his role as superintendent as one that is responsible for impacting and improving the community's education system. Having young children in the education system of the County, John also has a personal interest in seeing that the public school system supports community development and learning opportunities for community citizens. His role as superintendent of schools positions him as a community leader. He has been a resident of the County for a total of 29 years.

Mack

Mack is the current chairman for the County's Health Zoning Committee. He has lived his entire life—74 years—in the County and has served in various leadership positions. He served on the Board of Education for 11 years and worked in the school system for 9 years. He then took a state job, which he maintained for 25 years until his retirement. He has been a member of the Development Authority since the 1970s as well, and he was the County's Citizen of the Year in 1998. He described his community as "uneducated" and "underemployed." He feels that these negative attributes have only magnified within the last 20 years.

Nancy

Nancy is the mayor of the county seat of the County. She has been the city's mayor for 3 years. She worked in the local school system for 24 years, several of those being school

superintendent. After retiring, she decided to run for mayor. She made the decision to run because she wanted to help her community. She saw some changes that needed to be made, and she felt she could help lead the community in making them. In defining community development, she places emphasis on the aesthetics of a community in shaping the attitudes and opinions that citizens have for their community. She mentioned several ways that the city could beautify itself. She also sees her community as being comprised of two groups of people: the “nice ones” and the “troublemakers.” She has been a resident of the County for 74 years.

Olan

Olan has been a resident of the County for over 70 years. He worked for a manufacturer in the County for over 35 years before retiring and acquiring his current role as Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners. This position also places him on the boards of the Board of Health Office, the Transportation Board, the Senior Citizens Center, and Recreational Department. Olan described his community as having a “conservative type culture.” He discussed some animosity that exists between leadership groups and individuals in the community; ultimately, he feels that the community entities need to “pull together for a common goal.”

Ronnie

Ronnie is the Vice President of a major bank in the County. Ronnie has served in his role for 10 years and has been a resident of the County for nearly 40 years. He is actively involved in the County’s Economic Development Authority, the Joint Development Authority of the region, the Rotary Club, the County’s youth leadership program, the Recreation Department, and the Exchange Club. In the past, he has also served on the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors and been involved in the adult leadership program, which is no longer in operation in the County.

He described his community as “close-knit” and economically “stable” since the County “didn’t have anything” before the recent economic downturn. Ronnie believes that politics play a huge role in the development of the County.

Rose

Rose is the president of the Chamber of Commerce for the County. Rose held various positions working for the cities within the County before taking on the role as Chamber president. She has been in her current role for 3 years. When asked to describe her rural community, Rose described its physical makeup, with the County comprised of 6 cities or municipalities. She sees her leadership role in the community as one that is responsible for promoting the County to businesses and industries in a matter of economic development, including tourism. She also feels her position puts her in the role as liaison between her County and neighboring counties. She defines community development in terms of economic development, but notes that that any way individuals can improve their communities is what makes up community development. She has been a resident of the County for 19 years.

Terry

Terry is a “lifetime resident” of the County. He proudly described the majority of the citizens of the community as assets in that they are of “good quality” and are “loving people.” He sees the community as “family-oriented,” with “positive family morals.” However, he did describe the economy of the community as “depressed” and “undeveloped.” He has worked at a major community bank for 26 years, serving as president of that bank for 6 of those years. Terry stated that he has always been involved in community development in the County.

Overview of Findings

The purpose of this bounded case study was to explore how rural leaders experience rural community development and to understand the perceptions of community leaders in identifying and promoting community assets, including human assets and learning opportunities. Four general research questions guided this study and the interview process in understanding leaders' experiences related to rural community development. As a result, four themes emerged during the course of this study and through analysis of interviews that helped to answer the research questions and provide more insight into rural leadership in the community development process. These four themes are (1) varying definitions of community development from community leaders, including an inseparable connection between community and economic development in rural development and a strong response from participants describing the people within the community, (2) the importance of collaboration among community citizens and entities in the community development process, (3) the existence of politics in identifying and utilizing assets in community development, and (4) a weak acknowledgment and utilization of adult learning opportunities as assets to aid in rural development.

Before data collection, I held the notion that community development and economic development were separate terms. The first set of questions addressed each participant's definition and involvement in community development. Participants were asked to describe how they defined community development as applicable to rural communities. Then participants were asked who is responsible for community development in their communities. Within this set of questions, participants were asked to describe their rural communities as well. The responses to these two questions actually show that the majority of rural community leaders interviewed for this study view economic development and community development as interchangeable. Their

responses showed no clear separation between the two terms. Also, most participants held the same views of their community in their description of it and on whom they believe is responsible for initiating development. Participants view the community as in need of improvement, and participants mentioned the same people as individuals who were key players in initiating and operating community development. This set of questions yielded the first two themes: (1) varying definitions of community development from community leaders, including an inseparable connection between community and economic development in rural development and a strong response from participants describing the people within the community and (2) the importance of collaboration among community citizens and entities in the community development process.

The second set of questions addressed participants' views of how well their community creates a learning environment for its citizens as a component of community development. Responses reflected minimal opportunities for adult learning as means of developing the whole community. Most opportunities mentioned were through formal learning (e.g., the school system or the local technical college satellite campus). When asked in what learning opportunities they had been or were currently involved, participants could name very few. In fact, several participants struggled to think of any opportunities that adults in the County have for learning and ultimately resorted to mentioning programs and opportunities targeting the community's youth. Also, all participants expressed a need for more adult learning opportunities in the community.

The next set of questions helps to pinpoint what community leaders view as assets in developing their community and to what extent those assets are utilized in the development approach. The responses to this question set were mostly uniform, with only a few responses

differing. Most participants focused on physical assets, mainly the County's natural resources such as the river, land, and timber. Also, participants felt that the County's location in the state, almost exactly in the middle of the state, were positive attributes the community could utilize in development. Half of the participants mentioned the people as assets in the community, referring to them in a familial and friendly manner, and stating that this atmosphere makes the community attractive. However, participants did not feel that the physical assets of the community were utilized well because of the political nature of the community.

The fourth set of questions inquired which assets are utilized in the participants' community development approach. Four participants believe that the school system is utilized well, and one believes that the natural resources are utilized well. The remaining half of the participants believe that none of the County's resources are utilized well, especially the County's location and natural resources. These participants remarked that the community takes these assets for granted, and some citizens felt that land owners in the community were not interested in utilizing these resources in community development efforts. This, along with the second and third sets of questions, yielded the last two themes: (3) the existence of politics in identifying and utilizing assets in community development, and (4) a weak acknowledgment and utilization of adult learning opportunities as assets to aid in rural development.

As a result of the process of constant comparative method of analysis, four themes emerged from the four research questions that guided this study: (1) varying definitions of community development from community leaders, including an inseparable connection between community and economic development in rural development and a strong response from participants describing the people within the community, (2) the importance of collaboration among community citizens and entities in the community development process, (3) the existence

of politics in identifying and utilizing assets in community development, and (4) a weak acknowledgment and utilization of adult learning opportunities as assets to aid in rural development.

Community Development Defined and Connected

To begin each interview, I asked participants, rural community leaders, to describe their rural community and provide a general definition of community development. Participant responses to both questions yielded two major themes related to economic development and citizen collaboration: (1) varying definitions of community development from community leaders, including an inseparable connection between community and economic development in rural development and a strong response from participants describing the people within the community, (2) the importance of collaboration among community citizens and entities in the community development process.

Various Definitions of Community Development

When asked to define community development, several participants provided textbook definitions of community development in that participants' responses included anything which positively affects the lives of community citizens. Andy sees community development as "a function of building on the strengths and assets that you have present in your community." He continued by stating that community development is "a broader concept" than just "extending the tax base, interesting the number of businesses and so forth" of a community. Instead, Andy explained, "It also includes the human aspect, improving the situation of people, education and qualifications for jobs, and those kinds of things, and meeting their needs. And again, that's not just economic needs, entertainment or social, and so forth."

Likewise, John stated that community development is a “rather broad term.” In his elaboration, he stated that

most people would immediately think about economic development, and that’s certainly a critical part of it, but I think it goes far beyond that. It goes into—think about certainly your educational system, recreation, the arts, even anything if you wanted to try to define it—anything that, whether it’s systematic or whether haphazard I suppose, that goes toward improving your community, I would see as community development; of course you may have initiatives or systematic ways of approaching that, but other things that occur can help to develop or improve any part of a community.

In his final thoughts of his interview, John expressed a desire to encourage other citizens to get involved and work hard to improve the community and, as a result, benefit the children of the County. He feels that there are plenty of people who wish the same for the community, but “it’s just a matter of how to do it.”

Despite her role as the leader of the main organization responsible for attracting industry and business to the community, Rose, president of the Chamber of Commerce, stated,

Community development is not necessarily just always growing an industry. It’s about making your community better in whichever way you can find possible...if it’s making your school system better. It’s making a place for us to live, work, play, and to call home. That is our motto. It’s about when people come to our town, they want to visit or to move here, making ourselves attractive to other folks and to ourselves.

Terry added that community development is about giving back to one’s community.

Terry explained that community development is about “doing what you can individually and as a group to make your community a better place in which to live, to raise a family, and to give back

to that community a measure of success and appreciation that you have gained by...from being a part of your community and do your part to give some of it back.”

Economic development connection.

In addition to defining community development in terms of improving the lives of community citizens, several participants immediately described it in economic terms. All participants agreed that the County is impoverished. John stated that his community has a “very high poverty rate,” further clarifying his response by stating, “I think at the school system, free and reduced lunch was about 80%; not very much economic development at all. It’s declined, I would say, over the last 15 to 20 years.” He continued to discuss the County economically, stating that private economic activity has declined while the prison industry rose. He pointed out that the County is “really only left with one major manufacturer, and they’re seasonal.”

Similarly, Ashley, Mack, Terry, Olan, Andy, and Jane all mentioned lack of employment opportunities in their descriptions of their community. Ashley discussed the County’s disadvantages, including recently losing its hospital. “It just seems like nothing we do is going to attract anything,” he stated. He admitted that he honestly doesn’t know how the community could ignite the community’s stagnant approach to development. However, Ashley compared his community to similar rural communities: “We’re just like any other community; we’re struggling to do the best we can.” He gave credit to the local state representative for the assets that have been brought into the community lately, but he further discussed a factory and another large employer in the community that have both closed within the past two decades, asserting that the loss of these employers was the political climate of the County, which will be discussed in the section regarding the third emergent theme.

Within the realm of small-town politics, Mack discussed leadership within the community. He asserted that community development consists of “economic growth and communication.” He believes that development should “bring about something and something benefits, something that’s going to make the community better than what it is.” He specifically mentioned improvement of infrastructure, such as the County’s roads, as an example of community development and growth. However, he discussed the ever-present lack of communication among community leaders and indifference among community citizens as the root causes of little growth in the community. When asked how the community could be developed, Mack stated, “I don’t know how to do it.... [the citizens] could show more interest.”

Terry believes that the community is “educationally progressing” but further described it as “somewhat still undeveloped...economically depressed.” Terry stated that the geographic location of the County has “to some extent hampered...our growth” economically since the community is so remote. He envisions the County becoming a bedroom community one day, where the County will be viewed as a nice place to live and raise a family yet still be close to major hubs of industry to provide more jobs and recreation for its citizens.

Olan shares the same sentiment with his fellow County leaders. He discussed the past state of the County:

It had, at one time, had several—we’ve lost several businesses. We’ve lost a hospital, and we have lost a number of stores, downtown stores, and businesses like that. You know, that’s a lot of employees, and those are lost salaries in the County.... There’s no way that the way the economy is that...I don’t see where a family of one can support the family today.

He continued to compare the County today to how it was in the past, stating, “A lot of things the County doesn’t have now, they used to have.” He believes that the County does have the essentials it takes for the citizens to live in it, but he stressed that the entities of leadership could work on communicating better in order to improve life there. In his role as Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners, he wants to see his board and the Chamber of Commerce collaborating more to make these improvements happen.

Andy, also on the Board of County Commissioners, mirrored Olan’s responses about the decline of the community. Having grown up here and then living away for 40 years before returning, he stated that “the decline [of the community] was very evident. Many of the things that were here when I was growing up are no longer here—things like entertainment. And many of the businesses and staples are closing and so forth.” This inspired him to get involved. “I felt like that there was something that I could contribute,” Andy provided.

Andy further discussed the economic state of the community similarly to his fellow leaders. He stressed that the community just doesn’t have a lot to offer its citizens in terms of employment opportunities. However, he believes that trying to increase employment opportunities for high school graduates may not be the right goal for the community to strive to reach. Instead, he wants leaders and citizens to “focus on small businesses and help us keep desirable aspects. I think that’s very possible.” These desirable aspects include the County’s recreational opportunities, which he believes the County has “not capitalized on.” When asked why these opportunities were not utilized, Andy, like his fellow leaders, described the leaders of development entities and the cities or regions in which they are housed as having “self-imposed divisions.”

Jane also alluded to communication as a key element of community development. She began her description of the County by describing it as “destitute,” clarifying that she feels her community is actually “not necessarily bound by county lines” but more about the whole area in which she lives. She discussed her County’s adjoining county as part of what she sees as her whole community. She stated that both counties

face the same challenges and if they would work together, it would really be to their benefit...if they would come together as one and try to solve their same problems. We have very few job opportunities...we, unfortunately because of economic times to a degree but historically have not had a lot to offer outside businesses, outside industries. And we don’t seem to be able to attract a lot of industry. And it’s difficult to keep what we have here.

To elaborate, Jane provided an example of a time when a community leader was in charge of selling the community in an attempt to attract a potential business. “I don’t think that that person really meant not to do a good job but just didn’t have the expertise that was needed to know what to do,” she said. As a result, the industry located in another community. “There’s a way to go about doing these things,” Jane believes, “and we’re lacking in that department.”

In their descriptions of their community and their definitions of community development, 10 of the 12 participants mentioned economic development as a key component of community development. When asked to define community development, Ashley immediately began to discuss the state of the community’s economy, describing the community as “broke” and unable to provide prospective businesses and industries with much in attempting to lure them to the County: “We’ve got the roads here, but it just seems like nothing we do is going to attract

anything...just seemed to never be able to attract too much industry.” Ashley believes this certainly puts the County at an “economic disadvantage.”

When asked to define community development, Jane, like Andy, focused on the physical assets of the community in guiding development. She stated,

I would like to see this county develop its natural assets, but it has to be a blend. So if you could entice an industry to come down here...you’ve got to make people want to be a part of your community. You’ve got to present your community in such a light that they think, that they say, “I would really like to live here....”

Ultimately, participants expressed their views of community development in mostly economic terms, stating that those physical assets and opportunities can lead to community growth.

People define community

Several participants also described the community citizens in their descriptions of their community. These participants felt strongly that the people in the community are a huge part of the definition of community development. For the most part, the rural nature of the community provided participants with positive comments about the small-town feel of the community. Rose described the citizens as “family-friendly people.” Several participants agreed with Rose. For example, John described the community as “made up of good people; despite the poverty, there are fine people here, many of them who are very open. They’re giving.” Ronnie also sees his community citizens as those who would “come together for a common goal...at a time of need.” All participants described the majority of the community’s citizens in a positive light. However, 10 of 12 participants interviewed also discussed the negative attributes of some community citizens as they relate to community development.

In her description of the community, Mayor Nancy agreed with her fellow citizens that the County can boast quality citizens. She stated, “I love [this community]. I’ve lived here all my life. I like the small-town atmosphere. I’ve got lots of good friends here.” However, in her answer to the very first question asked of her during her interview, she shared that she sees the community as made up of two categories of people: those who are “real nice and want to work together” and those who are “troublemakers.” She stressed, as several other leaders mentioned in their interviews, that many of the community’s problems lie within the entities responsible for developing the community. She described development as a “joint effort” among the major development entities like the Chamber of Commerce, the County Commissioners, and Development Authority; however, this joint effort is not being made to the extent that it should be because some community citizens have different agendas.

Terry reminisced about when the community citizens appeared more involved in community events, mentioning several community activities that used to occur, such as the big Fourth of July celebration at the community’s state park. The event died off after a few years; according to Terry, no one stepped up to take over the planning and organization of it once he decided “it was time for someone else to take the lead.” Because of other responsibilities, he could no longer devote as much time as was needed to plan the event. “I just wish I could do something to inspire people,” Terry added. “What we gained from the aspects of it is that it just brought the community together. It was a common goal. It was having fun.” When asked what he thought he could do to inspire people, he stated, “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

A long-time resident of the County, Mack blatantly stated that the community and its citizens are “enjoying more than [they] deserve.” He explained his comment by referencing an ongoing and very public acrimony among certain leadership groups in the County and a lack of

citizen interest in important community matters, such as the hospital's recent closing. He discussed a "code of conduct" that is present at the County Commissioners' meetings, one that is not desirable in community leaders. He feels that this conduct is to blame for some citizens not wanting to get involved, but he ultimately believes that the citizens are uneducated and do not want to get involved. He stated that those who are educated are stagnant: "My biggest disappointment is the people that are educated and do have adequate employment but just don't want to get involved in anything that's not going to impact them."

As alluded to previously, several other participants agree that the community is comprised of some not-so-ideal citizens. Rose, Jane, Ronnie, Mack, Ashley, Nancy, Andy, and Olan all discussed the animosity between some leadership groups in the community, particularly among the Economic Development Authority, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Board of County Commissioners. These groups were also mentioned by every participant as key players in the community development process of the County, which will be discussed in the next section.

Collaboration is Key to Community Development

Every participant agreed that community development is the responsibility of civic groups and organizations, elected officials, and citizens. In other words, every citizen has a role in developing the community, not just the leaders of the community. Participant responses to this group of questions yielded a theme of collaboration as key to improving this community.

When asked who is responsible for community development in the County, all participants agreed that the initial stages were the responsibility of the three main development groups or organizations in the County: the Economic Development Authority, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Board of County Commissioners. The majority of participants felt that community development of the County is a challenge and would continue to be a challenge as

long as there is tension among these entities. When asked who she feels is responsible for initiating community development, Jane stated, “Who should be or who is?” She feels that these organizations—the Chamber, the Commissioners, and the Development Authority—should be initiating community projects more, but there are “factions that don’t want to work with each other.” Jane explained that the Development Authority and the Chamber of Commerce worked well together to promote community growth; however, the County’s Board of Commissioners should be a partner in this effort but is not. As Ashley, with his reference to the Board’s consistent 3:2 vote, and other participants discussed, the commissioners cannot come to a consensus within their own entity, so getting the entire Board involved in partnerships between the three entities is a challenge.

Rose’s responses to this question were parallel to Jane’s and Ashley’s; Rose provided an example of a monthly meeting she previously tried to organize with the County’s elected officials and other leaders to share ideas and discuss community development projects. These meetings were organized with the goal of teamwork in mind; Rose wanted to provide an avenue for the city officials and County officials to meet and greet. However, attendance fell after only a few meetings. Rose explained that this is because elected officials are “territorial.” In her explanation, city officials only want to work within their city and do not focus on the whole County’s development.

Olan immediately mentioned the Chamber of Commerce when discussing who is responsible for community development in this community. He states,

The Chamber is strictly the source of leadership for the County because we support it.

Taxes come in from the hotel/motel taxes, and also the Development [Authority], and we support it. So the Chamber, as far as I’m concerned, is the ones that should the leader to

getting developments started...not that the Board [of Commissioners] shouldn't be involved. These are things that are out there that are supposed to pool the resources to come together, the way I see it.

When asked about how strong the ties are among these three entities he mentioned, he states, "Not as strong as it should." He further discussed the importance of communication between and among the three entities, stating, "Communication...we've got to have communication."

Olan, as well as 8 other participants, openly discussed specific incidences where these three groups could not come to a consensus on an issue. In fact, of one of the entities, Mack believes it doesn't "have the County at heart." He provided an example of a newspaper article summarizing a recent County Commissioners' meeting. The article featured quotes of several commissioners arguing with one another on an issue; ultimately, the article presented to its audience a divided Board of Commissioners. Fran, too, mentioned the Board of Commissioners meetings in her discussion as to why many citizens chose not to get involved in community development. She stated that the meetings consist of "so much disagreement and controversy."

However, all participants agreed that these groups could not develop the community alone. In order to improve the County, participants felt all those involved should collaborate towards a goal. Mack stated that community development is "up to the entire community, entire citizenry to get involved in the community." Both Terry and John stress the same point. John states,

I don't know that I would want to designate or limit it to any particular groups or persons. I think it would be a partnership of organizations and private individuals. The Chamber looks for opportunities for the County and for the community in the County; certainly community involvement from everyday citizens to back and put political pressure on the

powers that be...the County Commissioners, the mayors, they would all certainly have roles in trying to bring things in or trying to procure grants, but I think to be a more powerful approach would be a grass roots, more citizens get involved. And when you bring everybody else along with the community, governmental organizations and the other organizations get involved as well, but you have a grass roots movement to get something done. I think that would be a more sustaining thing.

Similarly, Terry adds that community development is the responsibility of “every citizen...in general terms, everybody...whether they pay taxes or not. I think every citizen bears that responsibility.” While Terry lists that businesses, civic leaders, elected officials, and educators all have responsibility in initiating community development, he feels “first and foremost...on that list, the citizens” are responsible. First, however, these citizens, especially the leaders must learn to work collaboratively.

Politics in Community Development

In his interview, Al described many citizens who are pro-County, wanting to see it grow in size and in citizen involvement. On the other hand, Al discussed that some citizens also have the reputation as not always welcoming change. The community “has rested on its laurels,” Al stated. “There is a hierarchy of families who are happy with the status quo.” Fran, discussing the citizens who are not part of this hierarchy, stated, “I’m not happy with the status quo; I just accept it.”

Often in small communities, the term “politics” has two meanings. In his interview, Al defined the term in two groups: (1) “elected officials” or (2) “the ol’ boys club or the smoky, back-room deal.” The elected officials group contains individuals such as the state representative Ashley mentioned or the County commissioners and mayor interviewed in this study. The second

definition of politics is prevalent in this context, and it is the politics of money and power in a community. Al's reference to "these mythical backroom people" includes families who have monetary and decision-making power in the community because they, or someone in their family, always have. In discussing how this County's decisions are made, Ashley stated, "Some things are very political, and I guess we're not in the right political climate down here." He added, "It seems like politics always come back to haunt you." Interestingly, Ashley was the only participant mentioned by all the rest of the participants as a key player in community development.

Fran also mentioned "the old fathers" in her interview, clarifying: "People that are old family tend to be old family. They're concerned with their own life" instead of the well-being of the whole town. Fran continued, "It's a problem I've never been able to figure out. 'The old fathers' didn't want strangers to come into town." As community development generally involves planning, Cervero and Wilson's (2006) notations of power as "always being negotiated" in the planning process are applicable in this community. The authors state,

Planners always *negotiate with* their own power and *negotiate between and among* the political relationships of other people to make judgments about the features and outcomes of an educational program. At the same time, planners also *negotiate about* the political relationships themselves, seeking to reinforce or alter them. [italics in original] (Cervero & Wilson, 2006, pp. 87-88).

In this community's case, many residents choose either to reinforce or *avoid* political power. As a result, the community has not accrued many businesses or industries, has lost the involvement of many of its citizens, and has begun to overlook the assets the community holds.

Weak Utilization of Community Assets

Participants were questioned about what they viewed as assets that could be used in community development in the County. Then participants were asked which of those assets were utilized well and which assets could be utilized better. The participants agreed that the physical assets of the community were the most obvious assets the County holds. Other assets mentioned include schools, people, and the recreational department. One participant said he could not think of any assets in the community, but after several minutes, he mentioned the hunting and fishing opportunities available.

Every participant mentioned the County's natural resources as assets. These resources include land, location in the state, the river, the water aquifer, farming, and timber. Jane and Rose discussed the potential that the river could have in the development of the County, both emphasizing possible fishing and canoeing excursions for tourists. Jane stated that the County's natural resources would be her first asset utilized in "a dog-and-pony show" to attract people and businesses:

The natural resources, I would go all out. I would have pictures or video of people floating down the river, catching fish. I would have pictures or all these big bucks that have been taken in the County. I would have pictures of the turkey that's mounted...people on horseback riding through the woods. I would have pictures of people quail hunting.

Rose's comments were similar to Jane's. In mentioning the river, Rose points out that the river is an asset the County is lucky to have in that it's "nothing we have to build." The asset is always available. However, both agree that it could be utilized more in promoting the community and developing it. Rose noted that the County has "to figure out how to promote that asset."

Nine participants mentioned the County's natural resources as assets that are not well-utilized in the community. In fact, Rose stated that she doesn't think "the community sees them as assets." She explained,

I don't think they see. They feel a threat when it comes to the hunting, folks from out of state coming up to purchase land. They see that as a threat because those folks are willing to pay whatever to purchase the land. Um, they think that'll make our taxes go up...I don't think we recognize our assets. We recognize our structural assets such as our school system and our water and sewer, those kinds of things, and our businesses, but more of the natural resources, no we don't.

Six participants mentioned the educational opportunities for citizens as an asset, and 5 of the 6 participants think that the schools are well-utilized. As Superintendent, John sees education as

where the primary focus [of development] is as far as trying to impact children and trying to impact our educational system and improve it, realizing that these kids...I grew up in the same place they did, and I don't want them to feel limited just because they're from a rural area or just because it's a high poverty level.... We have a good system; we've been blessed with a great deal of technology which opens doors and allows children...to go beyond the bounds of our little community.

Mack believes that the education system is "not a problem," stating that "the educational opportunities are adequate," referring to both the public school system and the post-secondary education options available to the citizens. Mack did admit that "all of it can be improved in certain areas," but he explained that the community has "education institutions close by, accessible, and they also accommodate you." He stressed that no one in the community has an

excuse not to seek an education if it is desired. Fran's responses aligned with Mack's; she stated that the County is pretty central to several institutes of higher learning.

Three participants mentioned "people" as an asset in the community, but all 3 participants stated that the people are not utilized to their potential. For example, Mack believes that even "high-quality citizens don't demonstrate their ability" and don't get involved.

Four participants believe that the County does not utilize any of its assets well. The participants, as discussed above, felt that a lack of communication among community leaders and a lack of collaborative goals prevented these assets from being well utilized. When asked the question, "Which of your community's assets are well utilized?," Ashley stated, shaking his head, "Utilized well? We don't have much utilized." Included in that weak utilization of assets is learning opportunities for citizens, especially the community leaders themselves.

Need for More Adult Learning Opportunities

One element that guided this study on community development was the intent to explore learning opportunities the community offers its citizens. Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) Asset-Based Community Development approach emphasizes education and learning as part of the growth process that occurs in both the developing community and the citizens of that community. The authors state, "Creative approaches which both involve local residents in economic activity and which at the same time build their skills and capacities are particularly important" elements of the community development process (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 283).

The question, "What programs and/or activities constitute learning activities in your community?" was asked of each individual in order to connect adult learning to the community development process. Each participant provided responses, including the following activities or

programs: schools (both public and technical college), the annual Chamber of Commerce banquet, the Work Ready program, a childhood literacy program through the Ferst Foundation, the Youth Leadership program, and a children's summer reading program through the local library. Two participants also mentioned that a rural development study of the County had recently been conducted by students at a nearby college, but, to the participants' knowledge, results of that study had not been utilized yet. Of these mentioned, only three (the Chamber banquet, the Work Ready program, and the technical college satellite branch) were tailored for adults.

The Chamber banquet occurs once a year and includes awards such as Business of the Year, Man of the Year, and Woman of the Year. It also provides a chance for all citizens and businesses to come together to celebrate one another and the community. A guest speaker or entertainer is featured and usually promotes a message of unity and togetherness. Although this is a brief learning opportunity, Rose feels it is important to get elected officials together "if it's nothing else but sit and listen to the speaker." She stated the banquet attendance grows each year, and it's an opportunity to promote the positive in the community: "You just keep talking positive to them. It's hard. How do you do it? You just keep involving them in whatever is going on...you invite them all together at the same time."

The Work Ready program is a program designed to categorize community citizens by their knowledge of basic skills and work habits (Georgia Work Ready, 2009). The categorization is determined by skills-based assessments with measurements of Bronze, Silver, Gold, and Platinum in areas like reading comprehension, math, and logic/reasoning. Once a certain number of citizens have taken the test (percentages are determined by the state of Georgia and based on County's workforce percentage) and the County has demonstrated an effort to improve high

school graduation rates in the County, the community can boast the title as a Work Ready community. This title helps to promote the community to prospective businesses, and it helps citizens become more marketable as well. Through Rose and her team's efforts to get citizens to take the Work Ready assessment, the County can boast the label as Work Ready. Rose, Jane, Ashley, and Al mentioned the Work Ready label as one that will hopefully help to development the community.

The technical college satellite site located in the community provides services such as GED (General Educational Development) classes, core curriculum courses for certificate and diploma programs at the main site of the college, continuing education classes and training for local businesses, and adult literacy classes. The satellite campus provides instruction for programs such as Air Conditioning Maintenance, Criminal Justice, Early Childhood Care and Education, Industrial Systems Technology, and Patient Care Assisting. This is the County's sole resource of formal adult learning for its citizens. Interestingly, however, only 7 of the 12 participants mentioned it at all during their interviews.

Several participants also mentioned programs or activities that used to be available for adult citizens, such as the former mentor/leadership program and a monthly gathering sponsored by the Chamber organized to inform County officials of outside resources and to provide a chance for collaboration on projects and/or issues presented. Each participant mentioned at least one activity that he or she considered a learning opportunity for citizens; however, most of these learning activities are tailored to youth.

The quality of public education of the County came up in several answers to the question of learning opportunities in the County. Most participants described the local public school system as "improving" and "adequate." However, Mack described the County citizens as

“undereducated, underemployed, and don’t have any ambition” while stating also that there are “education institutions close by, accessible” and accommodating for citizens. Yet, as Andy points out, a third of the County’s citizens do not even have a high school education. However, several participants listed the school system as an asset in the community.

Summary

This bounded case study explored community leadership in rural community development. Grounded in Asset-Based Community Development, this study sought to examine what community leaders perceive as assets, including educational opportunities for adults, in developing their community. This study serves as a model for how rural communities and their leaders approach and perceive community development. Furthermore, this study provides one example as to what rural leaders view as assets that are or could be utilized in development. The four themes presented in this chapter are key components emergent through the exploration of community development in the County being studied. These findings could serve as a useful tool for not only this County but also other rural communities.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm. – Henrik Ibsen

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative bounded case study was to explore how rural leaders experience rural community development and to understand the perceptions of community leaders in identifying and promoting community assets, including human assets and learning opportunities. Research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do community leaders experience rural community development?
2. What roles do community leaders play in creating a learning environment through rural community development?
3. How do rural community leaders define assets, specifically human assets and learning opportunities, within this rural south Georgia community?
4. In what ways do community leaders utilize assets in community development activities?

This study examined how rural community leaders view and utilize their roles as community leaders in the community development process.

This qualitative bounded case study was bounded in a particular rural south Georgia county. This study examined how that rural county's community leaders view and utilize their roles as community leaders in the community development process.

This study was guided by a qualitative research design. Interviews involving 12 community leaders of a rural south Georgia community were conducted, transcribed, analyzed, and coded for similarities based on their responses. Eight of these community leaders were chosen based on their positional leadership roles while the other 4 participants were recommended by the first 8 community leaders as stand-out leaders in community development efforts.

This final chapter of the study presents conclusions derived from findings, the relationship of these findings to Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), any implications for practice, and possible recommendations for future research related to rural community development, rural community leaders, and assets and adult learning opportunities in community development.

Conclusions and Discussions

From the findings presented in Chapter 4, four conclusions emerged through a constant comparative method of data analysis. These conclusions were (1) economic development is a key component of community development, (2) communication and collaboration among community leaders and citizens are key components of a community's development, (3) community development is a political process characterized by the exclusion of key assets, and (4) community leaders must see adult learning opportunities as assets in the community development process.

Conclusion 1: Economic Development is a Key Component of Community Development

Community leaders who served as participants in this study responded to the question of defining community development with a focus on economic development. While several participants did define community development as making a community a better place to live and grow for community citizens, all participants inevitably discussed that there was no way to separate economic development from community development completely. This conclusion is in line with Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) first of two purposes for employing an Asset-Based Community Development approach: "developing the local economy" (p. 350).

In their responses to the probe to define community development, participants discussed the economy of their County, reminiscing about times when businesses flourished and community citizens were more involved in community activities. Perhaps due to the waning economy of the nation, participants, as a whole, expressed concern in their descriptions of their impoverished and uninvolved citizens. They described times in the County where citizens showed up in droves to July 4th celebrations and to shop at local stores. Today, however, citizens of the community in focus tend to stay to themselves and shop in neighboring towns where there is more of a selection. Several participants stated that many citizens of this County believe it has little to offer residents and visitors. Morse (2004) discusses "the hopelessness...that occurs when a community and its residents think and act as if they have nothing to offer, only services to receive" (p. 90). When a community's residents view the community in this way, they are approaching community development in a way Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) describe as a needs-based approach. An Asset-Based Community Development approach, where the focus of citizens is on what the community has to offer, could encourage the whole community to begin recognizing assets that could be beneficial in improving the economy of the community.

Participants in this study expressed that some citizens are more focused on the community's economic deficiencies than the community's assets. Also, participants made a strong connection between what their neighborhood has to offer economically and what their citizens put into community development efforts. Therefore, in the case of this County, economic development is directly tied to community development. For example, several citizens who mentioned the County's natural resources as assets believe there is economic development potential in these assets but stated citizens and other leaders either do not see these assets' potential or are not interested in utilizing the assets. Green and Haines (2008) state that "in the past, natural resources have been viewed primarily in terms of their productive value, but increasingly communities are considering the consumer value of their natural resources and viewing their natural resources as amenities" (pp. 169-170). Perhaps this County is on the verge of making this change of opinion regarding their natural resources.

Conclusion 2: Communication and Collaboration are Key Components of a Community's Approach to Development

Per analysis of participant responses to questions concerning the development efforts of the community, communication and collaboration are key to successful community development. Participants discussed the people of the community in two lights: simply put, good and bad. Participant discussion shows while the good in the County's citizens comes out in time of need, the everyday interactions between leaders and citizens are sometimes tense. Also, many community citizens are indifferent to, or at least cautious about, getting involved in development as a result of the lack of communication or animosity that is present during many development efforts. According to Mike Cushman (2006), building community cohesion is essential in development of 'a good society;' (p. 14). As participants noted, the County leaders and other

citizens that served as the focus of this case study occasionally lack the ability to communicate and collaborate upon a common goal in developing their community. Ultimately, the participants agreed that community development is the responsibility of everyone, so this is an area upon which community's leaders and citizens need to improve.

Working collaboratively towards a common goal was discussed by nearly all participants in this study. According to Morse (2004), "Leaders make a difference. Communities need to think as much about their leadership development as they do about their economic and community development" (p. 206). Jane, Rose, Nancy, Andy, Olan, Ashley, Mack, and Ronnie discussed having witnessed incidents where County meetings, under the direction of several County leaders, were disruptive, inconclusive, and, according to participants like Mack, appalling. When probed to explain the events of these meetings, several participants described a scene where not only individuals from separate community leadership groups were argumentative but also, on occasion, individuals within the same community leadership groups were antagonistic. As a result, these participants believe that the community cannot prosper—economically or in any way—without more cohesiveness and collaboration. Mack held strong opinions about the lackluster efforts of community citizens to get involved, but he ultimately concluded that the lack of civility among leaders was grounds enough for some citizens to not get involved.

Conclusion 3: Community Development is a Political Process Characterized by the Exclusion of Key Assets

Participants had varying responses to the question about what assets their community possesses. The most common response to this question involves the community's natural resources—mainly, land, water, and location. The local timber industry is booming, but most of

those benefiting from this asset are a few wealthy land owners in the County. Furthermore, a major river runs directly through the County, but, unlike its neighboring communities, this community has yet to establish a public boat landing and capitalize on the various tourism-related activities that the river could provide.

Very few participants emphasized the community's citizens as assets, partly due to the economic downturn discussed above. Participants also expressed that a negative connotation has been associated with some leadership entities that are responsible for initiating development due to lack of communication and collaboration. Participants agreed that many citizens stayed away from community involvement simply because they did not want to be associated with the negative politics of the community.

During each interview, participants were asked to discuss key players in community development efforts in the community. All participants were hesitant to answer at first, especially to give specific names. However, participants ultimately named individuals who they felt were the decision-makers in the County. In this naming, however, participants were quick to point out who should be making decisions, such as the elected officials, and who actually is, several key land owners and business owners in the community. Rose noted that Nancy, the mayor of the County seat, was a key player because "she is not afraid to step out and step over that line and do what she feels is right. Whether she gets her way or not, she's not scared to take that opportunity to try to make her community better." The line to which Rose refers is the line of politics that dominates decisions and defines power in this community.

Leadership positions in communities connote power, but that does not always mean that formal leaders hold all the power to effect change. As Cervero and Wilson (2006) note, "power is the capacity to act" (p. 85). Although all citizens of this community could have power if they

so chose, the reality is that these citizens have over time become disenchanted with the power struggles of the community and choose to no longer be involved. Many community citizens feel as if their interests are not being met in community decisions, so they avoid coming to the “planning table.” As a result, key players no longer view them as assets in the development process. Instead, they see them as indifferent and uninvolved. Furthermore, when assets such as community citizens are not recognized in the development process, neither are the assets which these citizens may possess. This conclusion of the study adds richness to the study of power and politics in community development.

Conclusion 4: Community Leaders Must See Adult Learning Opportunities as Assets in the Community Development Process

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) define community development as “the process by which local capacities are identified and mobilized” (p. 18). These local capacities include all assets a community houses. The final conclusion of this study aligns with the second purpose of utilizing Asset-Based Community Development as a community development approach: “strengthening the neighborhood’s capacity to shape and exchange information” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 350). One way community citizens can exchange information is through utilizing and creating various learning opportunities for citizens.

Participants discussed learning opportunities as part of the assets their community could boast. The public education system was revered for the most part in participants’ responses, and participants agreed that the formal learning opportunities in the County were adequate, especially considering the level of poverty in the community. However, in terms of adult learning opportunities, very few were mentioned. In their discussion of adult education and social practice, Cervero and Wilson (1994) state, “educational programs for adults emerge from the

personal and organizational interests of the people involved in planning” (p. 171). In the case of this community, several participants expressed disappointment in some community leaders, and these leaders would likely be the planners of educational programs for adults. However, with undereducated and underutilized citizens, the community cannot improve its leadership.

Without more adult learning opportunities, the community is lacking a skilled and motivated group of citizens to initiate and participate in community development projects. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) see an educator—albeit a formal educator or a mentor—as one that will “get learners involved in a community of practice” (p. 169) and who will “help those who become stuck or immobilized in situations move ahead” (p. 170). As community leaders, the participants of this study are also educators, but without more learning opportunities for their citizens, these educators are not seeing much progress in development of themselves or their community.

Asset-Based Community Development Connections to Findings

This study was grounded in the conceptual framework of John Kretzmann and John McKnight’s (1993) Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach to community improvement. Within this framework, the authors contend that community development should be an approach which is focused on a community’s assets instead of its needs. In rural communities, such as the one in this study, an approach of this sort is difficult, as many community citizens find it difficult to see assets through all the deficiencies of their community.

In light of the findings of this study, Kretzmann and McKnight’s (1993) Asset-Based Community Development approach is not only ideal but also necessary for rural community development. When asked the question to discuss the community’s assets, Fran first response was, “I see a lot of needs.” Many other participants responded just as quickly with a glass-half-

empty response. The participants love their community; however, they are jaded by its stagnant development. In a community where deficiencies far outnumber assets in the minds of the citizens, an approach like ABCD could revitalize the community development effort.

Finding a way to get citizens thinking positively about their community, including its deficiencies, is this community's biggest challenge. The lack of funding or industry or shopping opportunities is not wholly what threatens this community's development; the people's mindsets do. Luther K. Snow (2001a) of Kretzmann and McKnight's ABCD Institute in Chicago, Illinois, states,

The threats of a community are always on the minds of community activists. The threats are real and present. The threats aren't the exception to the rule. The threats are the rule itself. It's how communities deal with the threats that counts. Turning threats into opportunities is not about exploitation. Everybody knows about the players who exploit community threats for their own advantage. That's not what community work is about. Turning threats into opportunities is about *transformation* [italics in original]. It's about the way that communities break out of a vicious cycle of disadvantage and despair, and break into a snowballing movement of hope and action. Transformation starts with vision, with the ability to *see opportunity* [italics in original] in the face of threats. (pp. 4-5)

Participants of this study felt strongly that the attitudes of the citizens towards community involvement were certainly a threat to the community's vitality.

Implications for Practice

Research in the community development field is vast. Various approaches to development have been proposed by researchers for years, and in light of these approaches, this

case study's purpose emerged. This purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of community leaders in the community development process and perhaps add to the literature more information about how community leaders fit into and influence this process. Furthermore, a focus on rural communities was necessary to make this study unique, perhaps adding to the practices of the adult education and community development fields.

One way this study could be used in community development practice is to embrace its connection to the economic standpoint of a community to determine an appropriate approach to developing that community. In her interview, Jane stressed that there has to be a blend of community and economic development attitudes in order to develop a community successfully. No one community development approach fits all communities. With this in mind, perhaps those in charge of community development could be more aware of the necessity of tailoring development to their community and choose a practice that best fits their community and its economic status. As noted by Hill and Moore (2000), community development practitioners and adult educators need to take a critical stance in interpreting what individual communities need in order to develop. This will save community developers wasted time and energy should they have chosen an approach that seemed more appealing or interesting than practical.

Developers, however, are charged with choosing a development approach that involves positive thinking and emphasis on all assets. Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) Asset-Based Community Development is one approach that communities should consider. Furthermore, as a tenet of ABCD, all community citizens should entrust themselves in leading this effort. For example, Snow (2001b) discusses hope for rural communities despite some people's belief that "rural economies are on the way down" (p. 105). Rural community leaders could put a more positive, encouraging spin on their discussion of their community's economy by pointing out the

community's ability to be a "flexible network," providing opportunities for expansion through space, beauty, nature, and culture (Snow, 2001b, p. 106).

Another way this study could be used is to serve as a reminder to community leaders that their roles require communication and collaboration in every decision they make. Personal gain should not guide their decisions, nor should personal prejudices. Instead, the potential benefits to their citizens, whom they serve in their leadership roles, should be the guiding force in their community development actions. Most participants discussed individuals in leadership roles in this community being studied who seemed to make decisions based on personal gain or driven by grudge. As Snow (2001b) points out, "Rural folks can hold their leaders accountable when everybody has to take a turn at leadership in some area" (p. 8). As the data show, however, politics do play a large part in the community development process of this community. This study should serve as a reminder to leaders and citizens that a leader's role is one of public servant, and the study should also enlighten community citizens of these leaders' perceptions of the development process. These realizations have to be publicly acknowledged for development in the community to occur.

Furthermore, this study yields important information connecting adult learning opportunities, rural leadership, and rural development. The County needs to develop more learning opportunities for its residents to encourage their involvement in community development projects. One example of an adult learning opportunity that the County could provide its adult learners is an adult leadership program like the one that used to exist in the County and was discussed by Ronnie in his interview. This type of program could provide opportunities for citizens to see their community leaders and the leaders' positions from a different perspective. Furthermore, these programs could be used to inform citizens of the

specifics involved in governmental operations, banking procedures, and various other community entities. Perhaps this would encourage more citizen involvement once they acquire a better understanding of their community. These activities would also provide much-needed collaboration between community citizens and community leaders.

Also, the leaders need as many learning opportunities as everyday citizens in that community. Leaders of a community require opportunities to learn and grow just as the citizens do. A more knowledgeable group of citizens would be a positive outcome for any community. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) state that adult educators “encourage people to critically analyze their situations and work toward a solution” (p. 171). In this community, many opportunities for reflection and collaboration could help the County in its development efforts. A continuation of the monthly gathering for community leaders would be beneficial to get community entities together in an informal setting to discuss community development. Several entities, especially elected officials within the municipalities, do not have many opportunities to collaborate with their peers. A leader’s willingness to grow and learn would establish that leader as a mentor for the rest of his/her community citizens, perhaps inspiring more citizen involvement in such educational prospects and possibly community development.

Recommendations for Further Research

This case study suggests that the community development, community leadership, and adult education fields are intertwined. Formal learning opportunities are not the only learning opportunities a community can provide for its citizens. Through analysis of the data that emerged from this case study, several recommendations for further research emerged.

In the community development field, a stronger and more accepted connection between economic development and community development should be emphasized, especially in rural

communities experiencing high levels of poverty and unemployment. A positive, asset-based approach to community development, one that focuses on working from the inside of a community outward such as Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), is ideal for all communities and should be employed. The fact remains that some communities are experiencing a level of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy that cannot be overlooked in initiating community development efforts. The community leaders interviewed in this study expressed desperation in their efforts to get community citizens involved and to build the trust of these citizens. Without outside resources and innovative ideas, these community leaders find their efforts to be somewhat futile. Based on this information, more case studies grounded in the Asset-Based Community Development approach in high poverty and rural communities are needed. Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative studies presenting best practices for recruiting citizens to participate in community development could be beneficial to help promote ABCD practice. Also, these studies could ignite leadership programs across the country, and these programs could be the subjects of many case studies.

In the community leadership field, this study exhibits the perils that a community can face when its leaders operate in the midst of zero or negative communication and collaboration among entities responsible for community development. This study can shed light on the presence of small-town politics, the "good 'ol boy system," as several participants referenced in their interviews, in today's modern society. In this particular case study, when several of a community's leaders fall into this category and the remaining leaders do not, a clash of ideals is inevitable. Research into appropriate leadership training for rural communities is implicated as a necessity by this study's findings. For example, other communities, both successful and struggling in the area of community development, could be studied, and random samples in the

form of citizen surveys regarding their community's leadership could provide rich data in identifying best practices in community development leadership. The practices could then be employed at various communities, providing opportunities for more bounded case studies to determine effectiveness.

This study also suggests a need for more case studies on leaders' experiences in learning throughout their leadership tenures. In one tenet of the adult education field, the humanist approach to learning, an individual's experiences are more influential than one's personality (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Ultimately, this tenet suggests that all human beings have the capacity to grow and develop into better individuals. Several participants in this case study mentioned leaders in their community who seemed to be unwilling to change their approaches to leading the community; as a result, these leaders are not seeing much change in their community or its citizens. More research into leadership qualities specific to rural communities would be beneficial to the adult education field, particularly regarding a humanist versus behaviorist approach to leadership and learning.

Although some research on rural communities exists, more research in community development, leadership, and adult learning in rural communities could continue to be studied to provide insight into these fields, both individually and interrelated. More studies on community development in rural areas are needed to keep these areas prosperous and competitive. More studies on leadership in rural communities are needed to examine best practices in community leadership. Finally, more studies on adult learning opportunities, especially as related to community development, are needed to enlighten communities of the benefits and influences of education in rural communities. Rural communities provide rich research opportunities in the academic fields of community development, leadership, and adult learning.

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APPENDIX A

RURAL SOUTH GEORGIA COMMUNITY MAP OF LEADERSHIP

Organizational Assets:

- I. Schools
 - a. College Satellite Campus Dean*
 - b. Public School System Superintendent*
 - c. Elementary, Middle, and High School Principals
 - d. Elementary, Middle, and High School Assistant Principals

- II. Business, Industry, Churches, Citizens
 - a. Pastors, Elders, Priests (no other religions represented)
 - b. Bank Officials*
 - c. Other citizens*

- III. Elected Officials
 - a. City Mayor*
 - b. County Commissioners*
 - c. School System Board of Education Members
 - d. Sheriff
 - e. Magistrate Judge
 - f. Probate Judge
 - g. Coroner
 - h. Clerk of Court
 - i. Tax Commissioner

- IV. Civic Organizations
 - a. Chamber of Commerce President*
 - b. Rotary Club President* (also college dean)
 - c. Development Authority President*
 - d. Historical Society Chapter Member*
 - e. Lions Club President
 - f. Masonic Organization
 - g. City Council members

* Represents individuals or groups with which interviews were conducted.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled "A BOUNDED CASE STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY LEADERS: AN EXAMINATION OF ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND ADULT LEARNING IN A RURAL SOUTH GEORGIA COMMUNITY" conducted by Jana Williams from the Department of Adult Education at the University of Georgia (229-425-3553) under the direction of Dr. Desna Wallin, Department of Adult Education, University of Georgia (828-507-0198). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at anytime without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The reason for this study is to explore how rural leaders experience rural community development and to understand the perceptions of community leaders in promoting community assets, including human assets and learning opportunities. If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

- 1) Answer questions about my perceptions of and involvement in community development which will take between 30-90 minutes and be digitally recorded.
- 2) Someone from the study may call me to clarify my information/responses.
- 3) My information/identity will be kept confidential throughout the study (through the use of a pseudonym). My pseudonym will be linked to my name in a password-protected Microsoft Word document only and destroyed upon completion of this study.

The benefits for me are that the participation in the interview process may help me understand and/or further define my connection to community development in my community. The researcher hopes to learn more about community leaders' roles in rural community development.

No risk or discomfort is expected.

No individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others. I will be assigned an identifying pseudonym, and this pseudonym will be used on all documents related to the research. Only the Principal Investigator (PI) and the Co-Principal Investigator (Co-PI) will be able to link me to my pseudonym. The digital recording of my interview will be stored on the Co-PI's recording device, and only the PI and Co-PI will have access to the recordings. This interview will not be publicly disseminated and will be deleted after the 3-year window for keeping research project materials has passed.

The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
Telephone: _____		
Email: _____		

Name of Participant	Signature	Date
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Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- 1. How do rural community leaders experience community development?**
 - A. Describe your rural community.
 - B. What experience do you have with community development?
 - C. How do you define community development in general?
 - D. What is your definition of community development as it relates to rural communities, particularly yours?
 - E. Who is responsible for initiating community development in your community?

- 2. What roles do rural community leaders play in creating a learning environment through rural community development?**
 - A. Tell me about your leadership role in the community.
 - B. How does that role fit into the community development process in your community?
 - C. What programs and/or activities constitute learning activities in your community?
 - D. How does your community advertise or recruit for these programs and/or activities?
 - E. What experiences have you had in creating and/or promoting a learning environment through community development?

- 3. How do rural community leaders define assets, specifically human assets and learning opportunities, within this rural south Georgia community?**
 - A. How do you define the term asset in relation to community development?
 - B. What are some assets you feel your community possesses that could aid in community development?
 - C. In your experiences, what assets are utilized the most in the development of the community?
 - D. What assets could be utilized more in your community?

- 4. In what ways do community leaders utilize assets in community development activities?**
 - A. What is a community development project you have been involved in that you are most proud of?
 - B. Do you think it was a success? If so, why?
 - C. What is a community development project you have been involved in that did not go so well?
 - D. Why do you think it did not go well?
 - E. What are some future community development projects that you would like to be involved in or initiate?
 - F. Who are some other key players in your community's development?
 - G. What roles do you think each play (ask individually based on response to F)?

APPENDIX D

CODING TABLE

	Experience in Community Development	Community Development Definition	Description of County	Responsible for Community Development	Learning Environment Response	Definition and Examples of Assets	Utilizing Assets
John	Superintendent of Schools	Economic dev. Recreation Arts Education Anything done to improve	Very high poverty Fertile farm land and timber Good people despite poverty Open, giving people	Chamber Partnership of organizations and private individuals County Comms.	Rotary – First Foundation literacy program	The people Infrastructure Roads School system Rec. dept.	Well - Education system and recreation dept. Not well – location/high ways intersecting
Rose	Chamber of Commerce President	Not just growing an industry – about making your community better in whatever way you find possible	Small town Family friendly people 6 municipalities	Development Authority Chamber Tourism Dept. School System	“Tea Time” for leaders Annual Chamber banquet Work Ready	Structural (water, sewer) Natural resources (river, land) Businesses Schools	“I don’t think community sees them as assets”
Jane	Manager of Admin. Services for Electric Company Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Youth Leadership Program	Blend of community and economic development	Rural and destitute Very few job opportunities Community needs to be doing more	Should be Dev. Authority and Chamber working with Commissioners Not that way because some people don’t want to work together	Youth Leadership Program Work Ready Mentor program in the past	Rivers, hunting, fishing, natural resources	Not well – transportation (location) Water aquifer
Nancy	Mayor, County Seat Former Superintendent of Schools	Beautify to bring in industry and restaurants	Made up of 2 categories of people: (1) “real nice and want to work together” (2) troublemakers	County Commissioners have authority	ABAC rural studies program focus	Financial institutions Small-town atmosphere Friends Natural resources	Well-fishing/hunting
Ashley	Chairman, Development Authority Owner, Insurance Company	Money – economic disadvantage	Small little community Had a lot of disadvantages (commissioners don’t want to cooperate)	Dev. Authority Chamber Commissioners (cut out Chamber)	Technical College No time to do this	People Railroad Roads	“We don’t have much utilized” People aren’t utilized well

	Experience in Community Development	Community Development Definition	Description of County	Responsible for Community Development	Learning Environment Response	Definition and Examples of Assets	Utilizing Assets
Terry	President, Major Bank in County	Individual and group Live and raise a family Give back to community	Rural Underdeveloped Economically depressed Educationally progressing Bedroom Community	Every citizen Business leaders Civic leaders Religious leaders Elected officials Educators	Youth Leadership Program Bank scholarship program with tech college	Good quality, loving people Adequate educational opportunities Natural resources	Well: Education Potential to build on recreational opportunities
Mack	Retired from BOE Chairman, Health Zoning Comm. Dev. Authority Member	Physical and economic growth	Uneducated and underemployed “We are enjoying more than we deserve”	Board of Comm. “Don’t have the County at heart” (people who make decisions aren’t knowledgeable)	Technical college	School systems Physical environment (weather, water, highways, open space)	Well: Schools “Delinquent in getting politics to work for us” “High-quality citizens don’t demonstrate” their ability
Ronnie	Vice President, Major Bank in County Economic Development Authority Joint Dev. Authority	Need money Need people to understand that changes don’t happen overnight	Close-knit - “everybody knows ev.’s business” Come together in time of need Tend to fight more than should More stable than others think	Dev. Authority and Chamber of Commerce	Youth leadership	Outdoors/natural resources (river, railroad)	Not well: Location/roads/ Transportation Not well: natural resources Well: Not really any
Olan	Chairman, Board of Comms.	“pull together for a common goal” “forget differences” “not bicker with each other”	Conservative-type culture Needs business	Chamber and Dev. Authority	Work Ready Altamaha Reg. Dev. Center training programs	<none provided> Then questions timber/farming?	Not well: Have people that need jobs and could support new industry
Andy	Board of Comms.	“a function of building on the strengths and assets that you have present in your community” Includes “human aspect, improving the situation of people, education and qualifications for jobs, and those kinds of things, and meeting their needs”	Employment opportunities aren’t here Very rural “Brain drain” – people are raised to leave	County Commission Chamber of Commerce Development Authority Work together “not very well”	Summer reading programs at local library	Def. of asset: “any resource that attributes to overall dev. of the comm.” Natural resources Undeveloped space	Well: School system and tech school center Not well: space and natural resources

	Experience in Community Development	Community Development Definition	Description of County	Responsible for Community Development	Learning Environment Response	Definition and Examples of Assets	Utilizing Assets
Al	Dean, Technical College Satellite Campus President, Rotary Club “I’m not a political person; it’s not in my nature.”	All citizens are “stakeholders” Education civic	“tremendous potential” “young people are tremendous” “smoky back-room deal” “the ol’ boys club” “leadership issue”	County Commissioners Chamber of Commerce Development Authority “have to have a group of visionaries— broad-based 10-15 basis”	Technical college Church-sponsored organizations Plenty of colleges around for “middle class and above” who are “mobile”	Workforce is asset Location (transportation in the form of rail and ports) is asset Economic status (money is available)	Well-education system Not well-politics and businesses are not involved like they should be
Fran	President, Arts and Historical Society Retired nurse Involved in church Lyon’s Club Eastern Star Volunteer, Library	Started talking about improving downtown area “biggest thing that worried me was hospital closing”	“I like that you know all your neighbors” “people caring” “everyone working together” “attendance has not been great” at auditorium opening “nothing to do”	Community leaders: mayor, County commissioners “so much disagreement and controversy,” leaders of civic organizations like Rotary	Public schools and technical college “County’s in pretty good shape with that” Pretty central to go to other place of higher ed.	“I see a lot of needs” “like a hospital” Schools Rec. Dept. Old churches and homes Museum	Well: Schools Senior Citizens Center Not Well: auditorium “I’m not a very big dreamer”

APPENDIX E

MEMBER CHECK MEMORANDUM

Memorandum

To: Study Participant
From: Jana N. Williams
Date: 12/01/10
Re: Dissertation/Case Study Follow-Up

Thank you again for agreeing to be a participant in my study about _____ County. I have analyzed the data collected through 12 interviews, and these are the conclusions I reached based on that data. Please contact me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or email me at XXXX@XXX.EDU if you have a response to these conclusions.

Conclusion 1: Economic Development is a Key Component of Community Development

Community leaders who served as participants in this study responded to the question of defining community development with a focus on economic development. While several participants did define community development as making a community a better place to live and grow for community citizens, all participants inevitably discussed that there was no way to separate economic development from community development completely.

In their responses to the probe to define community development, participants discussed the economy of their County, reminiscing about times when businesses flourished and community citizens were more involved in community activities. Perhaps due to the waning economy of the nation, participants, as a whole, expressed concern in their descriptions of their impoverished and uninvolved citizens. They described times in the County where citizens showed up in droves to July 4th celebrations and to shop at local stores. Today, however, citizens of the community in focus tend to stay to themselves and shop in neighboring towns where there is more of a selection. Several participants stated that many citizens of this County believe it has little to offer residents and visitors.

Participants in this study expressed that some citizens are more focused on the community's economic deficiencies than the community's assets. Also, participants made a strong connection between what their neighborhood has to offer economically and what their citizens put into community development efforts. Therefore, in the case of this County, economic development is directly tied to community development. For example, several citizens who mentioned the County's natural resources as assets believe there is economic development potential in these assets but stated citizens and other leaders either do not see these assets' potential or are not interested in utilizing the assets. Green and Haines (2008) state that "in the past, natural resources have been viewed primarily in terms of their productive value, but increasingly communities are considering the consumer value of their natural resources and viewing their natural resources as amenities" (pp. 169-170). Perhaps this County is on the verge of making this change of opinion regarding their natural resources.

Conclusion 2: Communication and Collaboration are Key Components of a Community's Approach to Development

Per analysis of participant responses to questions concerning the development efforts of the community, communication and collaboration are key to successful community development. Participants discussed the people of the community in two lights: simply put, good and bad. Participant discussion shows while the good in the County's citizens comes out in time of need, the everyday interactions between leaders and citizens are sometimes tense. Also, many community citizens are indifferent to, or at least cautious about, getting involved in development as a result of the lack of communication or animosity that is present during many development efforts. As participants noted, the County leaders and other citizens that served as the focus of this case study occasionally lack the ability to communicate and collaborate upon a common goal in developing their community. Ultimately, the participants agreed that community development is the responsibility of everyone, so this is an area upon which community's leaders and citizens need to improve.

Working collaboratively towards a common goal was discussed by nearly all participants in this study. Jane, Rose, Nancy, Andy, Olan, Ashley, Mack, and Ronnie discussed having witnessed incidents where County meetings, under the direction of several County leaders, were disruptive, inconclusive, and, according to participants like Mack, appalling. When probed to explain the events of these meetings, several participants described a scene where not only individuals from separate community leadership groups were argumentative but also, on occasion, individuals within the same community leadership groups were antagonistic. As a result, these participants believe that the community cannot prosper—economically or in any way—without more cohesiveness and collaboration. Mack held strong opinions about the lackluster efforts of community citizens to get involved, but he ultimately concluded that the lack of civility among leaders was grounds enough for some citizens to not get involved.

Conclusion 3: Community Development is a Political Process Characterized by the Exclusion of Key Assets

Participants had varying responses to the question about what assets their community possesses. The most common response to this question involves the community's natural resources—mainly, land, water, and location. The local timber industry is booming, but most of those benefiting from this asset are a few wealthy land owners in the County. Furthermore, a major river runs directly through the County, but, unlike its neighboring communities, this community has yet to establish a public boat landing and capitalize on the various tourism-related activities that the river could provide.

Very few participants emphasized the community's citizens as assets, partly due to the economic downturn discussed above. Participants also expressed that a negative connotation has been associated with some leadership entities that are responsible for initiating development due to lack of communication and collaboration. Participants agreed that many citizens stayed away from community involvement simply because they did not want to be associated with the negative politics of the community.

During each interview, participants were asked to discuss key players in community development efforts in the community. All participants were hesitant to answer at first, especially to give specific names. However, participants ultimately named individuals who they felt were the decision-makers in the County. In this naming, however, participants were quick to point out who should be making decisions, such as the elected officials, and who actually is, several key land owners and business owners in the community. Rose noted that Nancy, the mayor of the County seat, was a key player because "she is not afraid to step out and step over that line and do what she feels is right. Whether she gets her way or not, she's not scared to take that opportunity to try to make her community better." The line to which Rose refers is the line of politics that dominates decisions and defines power in this community.

Leadership positions in communities connote power, but that does not always mean that formal leaders hold all the power to effect change. As Cervero and Wilson (2006) note, “power is the capacity to act” (p. 85). Although all citizens of this community could have power if they so chose, the reality is that these citizens have over time become disenchanted with the power struggles of the community and choose to no longer be involved. Many community citizens feel as if their interests are not being met in community decisions, so they avoid coming to the “planning table.” As a result, key players no longer view them as assets in the development process. Instead, they see them as indifferent and uninvolved. Furthermore, when assets such as community citizens are not recognized in the development process, neither are the assets which these citizens may possess. This conclusion of the study adds richness to the study of power and politics in community development.

Conclusion 4: Community Leaders Must See Adult Learning Opportunities as Assets in the Community Development Process

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) define community development as “the process by which local capacities are identified and mobilized” (p. 18). These local capacities include all assets a community houses. The final conclusion of this study aligns with the second purpose of utilizing Asset-Based Community Development as a community development approach: “strengthening the neighborhood’s capacity to shape and exchange information” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 350). One way community citizens can exchange information is through utilizing and creating various learning opportunities for citizens.

Participants discussed learning opportunities as part of the assets their community could boast. The public education system was revered for the most part in participants’ responses, and participants agreed that the formal learning opportunities in the County were adequate, especially considering the level of poverty in the community. However, in terms of adult learning opportunities, very few were mentioned. In their discussion of adult education and social practice, Cervero and Wilson (1994) state, “educational programs for adults emerge from the personal and organizational interests of the people involved in planning” (p. 171). In the case of this community, several participants expressed disappointment in some community leaders, and these leaders would likely be the planners of educational programs for adults. However, with undereducated and underutilized citizens, the community cannot improve its leadership.

Without more adult learning opportunities, the community is lacking a skilled and motivated group of citizens to initiate and participate in community development projects. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) see an educator—albeit a formal educator or a mentor—as one that will “get learners involved in a community of practice” (p. 169) and who will “help those who become stuck or immobilized in situations move ahead” (p. 170). As community leaders, the participants of this study are also educators, but without more learning opportunities for their citizens, these educators are not seeing much progress in development of themselves or their community.

_____, please contact me if you have any comments or questions. Your role as a leader in this community is important to its vitality and development. Thank you for all you do.