Co-constructing a sense of community at work: The emergence of community in coworking spaces

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Abstract
As more individuals are working remotely, many feel increasingly isolated and socially adrift. To address this challenge, many independent workers are choosing to work in coworking spaces − shared spaces where individuals do their own work but in the presence of others with the express purpose of being part of a community. In this qualitative, single case study, we analyze how members of a coworking space work together to co-construct a sense of community through their day-to-day interactions in the space. We apply a relational constructionist lens to unpack the processes of "community work" as an interactive, agentic process. We identify three types of collective actions, or interacts, that contribute to a sense of community: endorsing, encountering, and engaging. These interacts represent different forms of community work that members interactively accomplished to maintain a desired community experience. The rapidly growing coworking movement offers insights, as uncovered in this study, on how to integrate a sense of community into the world of work.

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Introduction

As technology enables more flexible work, more people are working outside of traditional workspaces. In 2014 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 14.4 million self-employed workers (roughly 10% of the U.S. workforce). According to the 2013 American Community Survey, the number of full-time U.S. employees who work primarily from home has risen to over 3.3 million—almost 80% higher than in 2005 (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Many individuals are choosing to work remotely or as a freelance worker because they value work imbued with meaning, autonomy, and flexibility in schedules and work pace/content (Singh, Bhandarker, & Rai, 2012). Yet, these independent workers often feel isolated (Golden, Veiga, & Dino, 2008; Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Whittle & Mueller, 2009).

To combat feelings of isolation, some independent workers work in publicly accessible spaces, like coffee shops; however, these spaces often are noisy and lack privacy. Also, despite the affordances for sociability that coffee shops portend to offer, they provide only limited social engagement (Hampton & Gupta, 2008). Recently, membership-based "coworking spaces" offer freelance and remote workers an alternative setting that mixes open physical space, "third place" (Oldenburg, 1989) characteristics (community, flexibility, social ties), and workplace attributes (Wi-Fi, IT security, and consistently available space) (Johns & Gratton, 2013).

Our early exploration of why people cowork revealed that many do so less for the workspace itself and more to be part of a community. Indeed, the "Coworking Manifesto," an artifact of the coworking movement, states: "We envision a new economic engine composed of collaboration and community, in contrast to the silos and secrecy of the 19th/20th century

economy" (bit.ly/UZd7Tm). Given that coworking members have no shared employment

affiliation, and are only connected through their membership in the coworking space, we

became intrigued by how they form a sense of community (SOC). Our paper addresses this

question: how is a SOC constructed by independent workers in coworking spaces? Drawing on

an in-depth study of one coworking space, we investigate how the members mutually construct

and maintain a SOC.

We first describe the coworking phenomenon and then review the literature on community

in organizations to situate our understanding of our observations. We then introduce a relational

constructionist perspective (e.g., Hosking, 2006; 2011) to guide our data collection and

analysis. From our data, we derive three types of collective actions by which a SOC is co-

constructed: endorsing, encountering, and engaging. We conclude by discussing the theoretical

contributions and generalizability of our findings.

What is coworking?

Coworking involves "a diverse group of people who don't necessarily work for the same

company or on the same project, working alongside each other, sharing the working space and

resources" (DeGuzman & Tang, 2011, p. 22). "Coworkers" pay a monthly fee to share a space

with other freelance/remote workers with an explicit purpose of social belonging. Compared to

rental office spaces, which are organized around worker productivity and functionality (e.g.,

Davenport & Pearlson, 1998), coworking provides both a stable, functional work atmosphere

and membership in a social community. To date, organizational scholarship has paid scant

attention to coworking (Johns & Gratton, 2013, Spinuzzi, 2012), making it ripe for inquiry as a

growing organizational phenomenon[1]. In the next section, we review the literature on

community in organizations to understand what we might learn by studying these spaces.

Community in Organizations

Social scientists have long been interested in community but have achieved little

definitional consensus (Hillery, 1955; Brint, 2001; DiMaggio, 2003). Gusfield (1975) makes

the useful distinction between (1) structural community (i.e., geography or function) and (2)

community as the "quality or character of human relationship" (p. xvi). Early scholars posited

that the bureaucratic nature of work organizations constrains the formation of genuine

communal relationships (e.g., Tönnies, 1957; Weber, 1921/1978). Correspondingly, most

organizational research on community has taken a more structural approach, focusing on the

instrumental functions a community structure serves (Brint, 2001), including knowledge-

sharing, innovation, and collaboration that manifest in communities of practice, online

communities, and occupational communities (for a review, see O'Mahony & Lakhani, 2011).

Communities are assumed to form for a purpose beyond social connection as a valued end in

itself. Accordingly, community has been defined as "a group of people who are socially

interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share

certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it" (Bellah et al., 1985, p.

333). In this view, what makes a community is not a quality of relationships among members,

but rather a set of shared practices to accomplish some intended purpose.

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[1] The concept of coworking was formally introduced in 2005 by San Francisco software developer, Brad Neuberg. Since then, the number of coworking spaces has risen from 600 spaces in 2010, to 2000 in 2012, to over 4000 spaces in 2014 (tracked by deskmag.com, an online hub for coworking).

To understand the second meaning of community, McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed the notion of a psychological SOC, consisting of four properties: membership, influence, integration, and emotional connection. Membership is about belonging or personal relatedness, akin to identification with the collective. Influence is a bi-directional sense of members and the group mattering to each other. Integration is the feeling that needs will be fulfilled by the resources received from membership. Lastly, emotional connection is a bond developed through positive interactions and shared history. Experiencing a SOC has been shown to improve individual well-being and psychological health (e.g., Peterson et al., 2008; Prezza & Constantini, 1998; Pretty et al., 1996; Davidson & Cotter, 1991), primarily by acting as a resource to meet key human needs of affiliation and affection (McMillan, 2011; Nowell & Boyd, 2010). Kegley (1997) argues that "genuine community" contributes to a meaningful life. A SOC at work has also been found to influence organizational outcomes, such as employee engagement, empowerment, job satisfaction, and turnover (Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Boyd & Nowell, 2014; Boyd, 2014).

An important but inadequately addressed question in the literature is how can a SOC at work be created? Coworking spaces provide an intriguing context for observing a SOC emerge in a work context. First, coworking spaces are specifically designed to foster community, not necessarily as a means for group performance or workplace productivity. Second, coworking spaces have minimal bureaucratic and normative structure. Members come and go when they please, sit where they want, and talk with whom they want. The minimal structure allows us to focus on the role of interactive practices in constituting the social order of SOC, as the relationships are less conflated with some predetermined social structure such as shared roles or

tasks. To understand the behaviors and practices that lead to the emergence of SOC, our study

draws from a relational constructionist perspective. In the next section, we explain how this

perspective offers new insights about community and its emergence, which will help frame for

our analysis.

Toward a relational constructionist lens

Inspired by a recent push in organizational scholarship for a more dynamic view of

organizing, we adopt a relational constructionist view (e.g., Goffman, 1961; Hosking, 2006;

2011) which posits that the relational realities we inhabit "are not simply and self-evidently

there," rather people "actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements"

(Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 3). In this view, social order is a product of moment-by-moment

encounters in which people act in ways that open up relational possibilities -- which depend on

whether and how they are taken up and "socially certified" (Gergen, 1994). This perspective

draws our attention to relational processes, or "interacts" (Hosking, 2011), theorized as

simultaneous, ongoing performances that (re)construct a certain "form of life" (Wittgenstein,

1953), rather than assuming and attending to predetermined social structures. In fact, this

perspective acknowledges that a social order continually produced by interacts in organizations

can even resist changes to organizational structure (e.g., Weeks, 2004). Thus, understanding the

SOC—how it is formed, and why it emerges—requires attending to the multiple and ongoing

interacts that constitute community.

In other words, this perspective sensitizes us to the "work" involved in co-constructing a

SOC. In this study, we explore the idea of "community work," or the moment-by-moment

practices by which a SOC is mutually constituted. This construct is analogous to other recently

developed "work" terms, such as identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Snow &

Anderson, 1987), institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), and values work (Gehman,

Trevino, & Garud, 2013), which similarly refer to the actions that constitute a particular social

order or shared meaning (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012). Over 15 years ago, Barley and Kunda

(2001, p. 76) argued that more attention needed to be paid to "work," as "eras of widespread

change in the nature of work in society should lead to the emergence and diffusion of new

organizational forms and institutions." By examining the "work" occurring in the new

organizational form of coworking, we shed light on the processes that produce a SOC among

independent workers, and thereby gain insights on how traditional organizations can foster a

SOC at work.

Methods

The setting for our study is WelCom (pseudonym), a coworking space located in

Brookside (pseudonym), a mid-size, upper middle income, suburban town in the Midwestern

United States. At the time of the study, the space had 34 regular members and 29 affiliate[2]

members, with between 15 and 25 people in the space on a typical weekday. Membership

included roughly half freelancers (self-employed) and half remote workers (employed by an

organization), and encompassed a variety of industries, occupations, reasons for being in town,

and life aspirations. WelCom has three "maintainers" who manage the paperwork and finances

(e.g., make sure the rent is paid), oversee the process of joining (including managing the email

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[2] Regular members were given 24/7 access to the space. Affiliate members paid a significantly smaller monthly fee and were given four days each month to access the space, with the option to pay extra for additional days, and were also included in the email listserv and invited to all community events.

listserv), and help coordinate the volunteer participation of the members to meet the needs of

the community. WelCom's focus on creating community makes it an ideal case for elaborating

theory by offering a relatively uncluttered view of community emergence (Yin, 2009).

Data collection

To examine the interactive practices and how they influenced the experiences of WelCom

members, we collected data from three primary sources: ethnographic observations, semi-

structured interviews, and email conversations posted on a private member email listserv.

During six months of fieldwork, the lead author acted as a "participant observer"

(Czarniawska, 2007) by becoming a regular member of WelCom, while the other two authors

reviewed field notes and generated questions and insights to guide the data collection. We

obtained permission from WelCom and informed members of the study through the listserv.

During our observations, members would occasionally ask how the study was going, but for the

most part, they treated the researcher as a regular community member. The researcher spent

over 120 hours in the space, including attending town hall and maintainer meetings, helping

with various chores, and attending social events (happy hours, group lunches, trivia nights, and

holiday gatherings). The researcher worked in the space at least one day each week, with the

day and times varying from week to week, and took detailed notes of the observations and his

preliminary interpretations, remaining as descriptive as possible until major themes emerged,

consistent with principles of inductive research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

As a member, the lead author was added to the listserv and obtained the members' consent

to use the emails for the study. The content of the emails ranged widely, including asking for

advice about their own work, organizing social activities, welcoming new members, or sharing

information. We analyzed emails sent during the duration of the study. On average, over 300 emails were exchanged on the listserv each month.

The lead researcher also conducted 19 semi-structured interviews, asking about work background prior to joining WelCom, initial reasons for joining, how relationships with members evolved over time, and degree of involvement in WelCom (interview guide available upon request). Interviewees ranged widely in age, industry, membership duration (see Table 1), capturing the variety of WelCom membership. Our initial interests centered on why people joined the space and what they got out of coworking. As each interview consistently affirmed the centrality of the SOC as their motivation for being part of WelCom, we progressively dove deeper into understanding community, what it felt like, and how it emerged. Interviews lasted roughly 45 minutes and were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

Insert Table 1 about here

About half of the interviewees responded to an email invitation sent to the entire group. After conducting the first batch of interviews, we engaged in purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to seek cases that might challenge our emerging understanding of community. We interviewed several of the newest members, long time members, less active members, and even two former members[3] in order to obtain a broader range of community experience. We stopped conducting interviews when the representativeness of our sample satisfied us, and when interviews did not generate enough new insights to merit the potential irritation we might cause

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[3] These two interviews were unfortunately not recorded, and are not counted in the 19 interviews included for analysis, but were informative nonetheless.

in seeking additional interviews. Combining the interviews, observations, and emails, we felt

that we adequately understood WelCom members' experience of community.

Data analysis

Following principles of inductive research, our analysis iterated between data collection

and sampling, data reduction and representation, and conclusions and verification (Strauss &

Corbin, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we

scanned the field notes and discussed emerging dominant themes, which occurred concurrently

with field observations. Our research team held weekly meetings to discuss and assimilate

embryonic ideas based on the field notes and to compare observations with the literature.

Throughout this process, the first author returned to the field to gather additional data that could

corroborate or rule out our emerging theoretical storylines. As themes emerged, we used them

to organize incoming data in an iterative fashion (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), including the

creation of a semi-structured interview protocol to expound on salient themes.

In our second stage, we coded the interview transcripts using NVivo. We began with line-

by-line coding, expounding our understanding of themes that emerged from the observations,

and remaining open to the discovery of additional themes. This process produced a refined set

of first order codes underpinning the dominant themes from the observations, which more

accurately parsed out member experiences. We then searched the email data for additional

illustrations of these codes to enrich our understanding. By layering the interview data with

illustrations from our observations and the email data, we were able to synthesize detailed

narrative accounts of members' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From these narratives, we

began to cluster the first order codes into second order themes that revealed broad differences

in how members experienced SOC. The data structure is illustrated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Finally, we organized the codes into a coherent framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

After developing, exploring, and evaluating the utility of several alternative frameworks to

represent our findings, we arrived at one that offered a theoretical contribution and represented

the actual experience of WelCom members. Even as this analysis was underway, the fieldwork

was ongoing, keeping us in the "middle of the action" (Latour, 2005). As we developed our

theoretical model, we were able to compare it to what we were continuing to observe and then

revise the model accordingly. It also meant that as theoretically interesting episodes emerged in

real time, we were able to grapple with how they fit into our framework. As we met weekly, we

would revisit the data and attempt to articulate anew our theoretical understanding, causing us

to amplify some ideas and abandon others.

Findings

To elaborate our findings, we first describe how each facet of SOC was manifest at

WelCom. We then describe three interacts by which members create and re-enforce a SOC.

Lastly, we discuss how these interacts relate to each other.[4]

The Sense of Community at WelCom

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[4] Data tables with additional quotes supporting each part of our findings are available upon request.

Members of WelCom feel that *"community is actually the first and most important thing (M-1)"* about the space. As one member described, *"I tried home, I tried coffee shops, and they were okay, but when I started working here, I was like, 'Yes. This is what I need,' because it was a community (M-10)."* Members were consistent in labeling the *"social fiber (M-11)"* among WelCom members as a community, regardless of their tenure or degree of participation at WelCom. Four themes emerged from the interviews around how the members experienced community, which generally corresponded to McMillan and Chavis's (1986) four dimensions which we discuss in turn: 1) collective identity (membership) 2) filling a social void (integration), 3) sense of ownership (influence), and 4) genuine friendships (emotional ties).

Collective identity: "To me now it feels like a club. It feels like we are our own team, even though the only tie that binds us is that we're all members of this [space] (M-12)." Members saw WelCom not just as a place to work, but also as a community that enhanced their professional and personal identities – *"We are a community because we believe the same things and we want to make them work (M-6)."* One member (M-15) described talking about WelCom when friends and family *"back home"* asked her how about her move to Brookside: *"[WelCom] was a big part of our move. This was my way of establishing some type of community within [Brookside]."* Another member described: *"The people here have a ... team mentality. Everybody in here is working, and the fact that people are here helps me say it's work time. And I get motivation from that (M-12)."* WelCom became an integral part of how members described their work. A novelist (M-19) described how she likes to *"talk up"* coworking with other authors, explaining that having WelCom as part of her work identity makes it *"easier to feel like a professional."* We also observed that when WelCom received

positive publicity in the press, members celebrated with pride. This *"pride of the club (M-12)"* drove one member to *"often pitch membership to people that I just met (M-3)."*

    Filling a social void: "I was so deprived of human interaction.... The social interaction is the biggest value for me (M-16)." This member reported feeling very isolated working at home. Most members reported that their initial impetus for joining WelCom was that *"having a community where a bunch of us are together ... helps mentally and socially (M-9)."* A common narrative was that a job change or relocation led them to start working from home, but after a few months, they felt socially isolated. One member (M-16) described, *"I never showered. I started investing in more pajamas, 'cause that's what I was wearing all the time, and then when I would go out and see people I would talk nonstop and drive them crazy."* Another member remarked that *"we need to be around people regardless of what we do… because …you can't survive being by yourself (M-17),"* or that *"[coworking] is cheaper than the counseling you'll need if you work at home all by yourself (M-3)."* Many of them unsatisfactorily tried working in coffee shops or another public space, one reporting that, *"There are people there, but I'm not actively talking to people, and I remember just feeling like one day wanting to scream out like, 'Somebody talk to me,' because I wasn't talking to anybody. (M-4)"* Others had similar frustrations with renting an office, where they *"would see [others] in the hall and say hi … [but] you still don't really have any social connection to anybody else (M-14)."* Another member (M-5) described a desire to be able to go into a space where people would *"know [her] name."* Members described feeling like they belonged, and *"not just an anonymous seta-taker-upper (M-10)."*

WelCom satisfied the needs of its members by providing social connection that did not impose limitations to their flexibility and autonomy. Members could use the space according to their varying social needs. For some, that meant coming in every day. Others had an office elsewhere but still came in once a week *"to get [their] social jolt (M-8)."* One member who needed a private office for his work continued his membership at WelCom: *"For me, it's the social interactions, it's the gossip, it's the chat, it's the lunches. It's just seeing the friendly faces that you eventually build up friendships with, that's why I keep the coworking thing going (M-7)."* Some members reported that their relationships with members would continue even if WelCom no longer existed, one saying that Welcom members *"are actually my closest friends (M-5)."* Their relationships had become more than just a nice feature of the space.

Sense of ownership: "You start to feel a sense of ownership in this space because everybody's responsible for doing something (M-10)." At WelCom, *"members collaborate to work on the needs of the community and the space… and all members are expected to participate in something (M-1)."* What we observed surpassed the simple chores encouraged of members. For example, during a town hall meeting, the maintainers proposed a plan to divide a conference room into two phone rooms with a cost of about $3,000. Within three weeks, with minimal encouragement, members contributed the money/labor needed, even though many of them would rarely use phone rooms. Another example occurred when a new member volunteered for a clean-up event and was publicly lauded on the listserv: *"Like a good new member, the first thing (M-11) said is 'what task can I do?' She has decided to be the new point person on our 2nd Sunday Cleanups (M-6)."* Because *"everything is run on a volunteer basis, … that engenders a sort of community that you might not find in other places (M-3)."*

The desire to help was motivated by a felt *"social responsibility back to the team"* as members developed a sense of ownership. As one member (M-6) stated: *"because you get this kind of sense of ownership of the space, you feel more emotionally invested in it than if I were to just kinda show up in some office."* Members realized that *"this space is valuable to me and I want to ensure its survival, and so [they were] actively engaged in making sure it survives (M-10)."* This was especially salient given WelCom's financial challenges. The maintainers openly communicated these financial challenges to members, and many took it upon themselves to ensure WelCom's survival, seeing themselves as *"a part of keeping it running"* (M-10). Several members continued to pay membership dues after a change in work situation prevented them from frequenting the space, indicating a sense of commitment and connection to the space. Members contributed in myriad ways demonstrating *"mutual caretakership (M-6)"* rather than seeking to capitalize on a financial investment.

Genuine friendships: "You don't make friends by being a sort of fake, boring person (M-16)." Members claimed to feel comfortable being themselves at WelCom. Several members described being more guarded in past work settings, but at WelCom they could be their *"authentic self (M-16)." "[We] have closer friendships here than we could with coworkers at a regular job because [at a regular job] it's like feeling like you can't be your real self. You can't be or bring your whole self to work. You have to leave your personal life behind because you're at work, where here it's wide open (M-17)."* For example, a member (M-18) announced on the listserv that she was transgender and would be transitioning from male to female. The first response to the email exuded support from the community: *"I just wanted to say thank you for sharing this with us and providing some initial information on your feelings and struggles…*

Thank you for leaning on and trusting us (M-2)." Speaking with her subsequently, she described her appreciation for the wholehearted acceptance.

Welcom members shared many aspects of their personal lives with each other. On the listserv, members often shared family announcements (e.g., "my wife is pregnant"), personal achievements (e.g., completed writing a book), or personal requests (e.g., looking for a ride to the airport). Furthermore, we observed members celebrating one another's successes (e.g., new job/promotion, admittance to law school) and lamenting one another's hardships (e.g., not getting a job, frustrations with a boss, family illness). One emailed about his wife's cancer: *"Some of you have heard the difficult news my family received two weeks ago ... I'm sorry to have to share this via the email list - you are all a part of my virtual family (M-8)."* This email prompted a flood of emotional and financial support. Sharing their lives with each other facilitated deep connection: *"The fact that every so often a conversation just starts and people get to know each other… really got the space to feel much more home to me. I was much more comfortable in the space getting to know people (M-12)."* Likewise, the ongoing level of genuine concern for others' well-being signaled interpersonal connectedness.

Members described these relationships as different from typical co-worker relationships, because at WelCom there were *"no office politics (M-5),"* no *"pressure of hierarchical or dependent relationships (M-2),"* or *"co-workers without having the drama of co-workers (M-3)."* Politics could be avoided because there was no formal authority or competition over scarce resources, such as a promotion or the boss' attention. One member described: *"you can go out for happy hour drinks, and I've done that with co-workers, but I wouldn't like talk a lot about my personal life, and you can't complain about things to your actual co-workers the way you*

can here.... it's actually kind of nicer to be around people who are not my co-workers ... because I feel like I can have more meaningful relationships (M-5)". In the absence of workplace politics, members described feeling no pressure to act according to a set of professional norms, including maintaining professional distance, but could develop genuine friendships on the basis of being authentic with each other.

In summary, members described their experience of WelCom as a collective identity, filling a social void, a sense of ownership, and genuine friendships – consistent with the four dimensions of a SOC. Next we describe three interrelated collective actions by which SOC emerged.

Interacts that form a sense of community

A SOC was a prominent and consistent relational reality for WelCom members, even as the amount and quality of participation varied according to individuals' situations and desires. There were minimal formal practices implemented or enforced by the maintainers to create a SOC; rather, it emerged organically and volitionally. From our analysis, we began to recognize that it was in the variety of forms of participation accommodated in the community that each member was able to achieve a SOC.

Our coding revealed three interrelated collective actions, or interacts, leading to the emergence of a SOC: endorsing, encountering, and engaging. Endorsing provided the initial basis for members to experience a SOC based on a shared, mutually reinforced vision of achieving community, a process that began as soon as prospective members began to learn about and express interest in the space. Beyond the first interact, which provided a necessary foundation, we saw both 1) passively involved members whose felt SOC was achieved simply

by encountering and appreciating the norms of the community, including the potential to

engage in community activities and utilize community resources, without necessarily doing so

themselves, and 2) members who actively engaged in activities and enacted community into

practice. We next offer detailed descriptions of each interact and how they interrelate.

Endorsing a shared vision of community

The first collective action that contributed to a SOC was endorsing a shared vision of

community. Endorsing was instigated when people first entered the space, *"right when [they]*

came in the door [and felt] that social vibe (M-2)." Many respondents came to WelCom after

feeling socially isolated from working at home or other workspaces. Discovering WelCom

provided an *"excuse for gathering (M-6)"* in community at work. Members' initial desire for

community, when nurtured by the potential in the vision of community presented at WelCom,

gave root to the initial SOC. The process of collectively endorsing a vision of community

consisted of three aspects: making the community vision explicit, self-selecting based on the

desire for community, and mutually reinvigorating each other's desire for community.

Making vision of community explicit. One of the maintainers described: *"[WelCom's]*

reason for existence has almost nothing to do with people's work. It has to do with a need for

community (M-1)." Existing members communicated this community focus to prospective

members upfront. When prospective members tour WelCom, they hear the message of

community, including descriptions of social events and community norms, *"treat[ing] the*

space as just a perk (M-1)." We observed that these tours were some of the most lively and

interactive times in the space, as members turned the "community" on full strength to make it

plainly evident. A WelCom brochure similarly highlights the vision of community. *"All of our*

materials talk about community, social connection. That's what we focus on... we make a

conscious effort to make that the message that we lead with to keep that vibe going" (M-2).

Relatedly, community expectations are made explicit. They are *"upfront about the*

volunteerism (M-19)" that is expected, though not enforced or monitored. Tour guides framed

community activities and responsibilities more as opportunities than as obligations, with no

formal mechanisms to enforce participation. Participation could take a wide variety of forms,

including the affiliate membership option which provides a way to be connected to the

community via the listserv and community events with only limited use of the space. A

minimum level of expected community involvement is evident in the trial week program where

"people come and they have to meet other people and they have to get three people to sign

their cards, and they sort of have to buy into this idea that this a community (M-14)." WelCom

initiated the trial week after some people joined simply to have a quiet space to work -- a

practice signaling a vision of sociability over solitude. *"This is explicit in the design. It's*

literally the criteria for joining… community membership is explicit in the agreement that

you're entering when you join (M-1)." When four people working for the same company

decided to become members, the maintainers strongly advised them *"not to form [their] own*

little clique… to sit around, make friends with everyone else. Just don't become [their] own

subgroup (M-18)." By the time members choose to join WelCom, they clearly understand the

vision of community.

Self-selecting based on desire for community. Members joined because they desired the

community feeling*: "because it's something that we're upfront with people about, and because*

the trial member process... people who are looking for a community come here, because that's

where they find it. If they're looking for something else they don't come here (M-14)." WelCom collects no data on how many trial week participants become members, but we observed several prospective members start a trial week *"who came to the conclusion that, 'You know this is not my place.' (M-14)."* Members recognized that *"We lost people who would join and didn't want to be to be around people…They self-selected out (M-1)."* In addition to prospective members self-selecting out, the trial week gives members a mechanism to filter out those who would not be a good fit; although, according to members, only one prospective member was turned down when seeking signatures. After staying quiet all week, on the last day of the trial week, he offered to buy coffee for whoever would sign for him. A maintainer explained that this man missed the point of the trial week, and that attempting to engage in such a transactional exchange violated a basic premise of the community. After completing the trial week, the self-selection process culminates with paying membership dues, which literally and figuratively opens the door to new members, solidifying their entitlement to a SOC.

Mutually reinvigorating community vision. The third aspect of endorsing was that making the community goal explicit, and then people self-selecting into WelCom, continually reinvigorated members' desire to be part of the community. As new members saw the others' enthusiasm toward the community, their own enthusiasm grew as they envisioned being part of the community. M-10 described how *"it's invigorating to have that kind of energy from this space, and so I look forward to coming here. I look forward to being in this space and working with the people and seeing these folks here."* It seemed that the enthusiasm for the community was contagious.

In addition to new members finding the more established members' enthusiasm for community contagious, the excitement of new members to be part of a community likewise rejuvenated the appreciation for the SOC for the existing members. One of the maintainers described the crucial role that new members play in *"breathing new life (M-14)"* into the community, reminding them why the community is not to be taken for granted. This commonly happens during tours: *"I think the tours have been particularly engaging experiences because… every time you give a tour, you're essentially giving this appeal for what this space has to offer. You become an advocate for the space (M-10)."* The inflow of new members provided frequent opportunities for members to remind themselves of the vision of community. So endorsing did not end after joining but was recurrently reinvigorated.

Summary. As new members witness and come to share the group's desire for community, this shared desire provides sufficient basis for a SOC, nurturing in new members a belief that they are wanted and welcomed. One member (M-1) described, *"By the very nature of being interested in the institution itself, you start forming bonds around your shared interest."* Another member (M-3) suggested, *"There's nothing really keeping anyone together here other than their shared desire to be part of this community."* So members begin to feel a SOC by collectively endorsing a vision of community that both unifies the individual to the collective, while allowing enough autonomy for members to customize the vision to their particular needs.

<u>Encountering moments of community</u>

While some members became active participants in the community, others preferred a more passive style of membership. Some did not often participate in social events, staying quietly focused on their work most of the time. After endorsing a shared desire for community,

they seemed content claiming a SOC based on the potential more than actual experience. Just by encountering the norms and practices of the community in action, either from the conversations in the space or on the listserv, members described how *"you can feel that it's there even if you're not involved in it (M-8),"* and *"you feel like you're interacting with people even if you aren't (M-13)."* Although the community was often quiet as members focused on their work, there were punctuated moments when the SOC was activated, which conveyed to passive members what the community can be for them even without demanding continual active engagement.

Adopting a term from relational constructionism, we refer to the collective action involved in the passive observation of the punctuated moments of daily community activity as *encountering* (e.g., Goffman, 1961). As Newton, Deetz, and Reed (2011) note, "From a relational constructionist perspective, any creature's experience is the product of a particular way of encountering the world" (p. 18). Repeatedly encountering the community in action "provides a world for its participants" (Goffman, 1961, p. 71). Encountering as a collective action involves actively engaged members making visible the potential for community engagement (which is further expounded as the third interact), but also involves those who observe, interpret, and then claim the relational reality they encounter. Encountering consists of three elements: observing the norms of the community, identifying commonalities with other members, and perceiving potential benefits of membership.

Observing social norms. Several members described their first few weeks as *"figuring out where you fit in,"* or *"a phase of quiet, kind of observation... then you sort of get a sense of where I can spark up conversations (M-7)."* One member (M-12) described, *"I had to learn a*

social cue, because I knew the space was dedicated to work and I didn't wanna be too rude and interrupt anybody." Because work and sociability are often perceived as being at odds, members felt a need to learn how the community aspect overlapped with the work being done in the space. Another described feeling that "*everyone should take their time to observe where they are before they make themselves seen to the world (M-8)."* During the early weeks of membership, members developed an understanding, based on their observations, of what it meant to be a community member. They would see that *"It's a pretty open community, and people are pretty willing to talk to you (M-15)."* At WelCom, the norms encouraged many forms of involvement, which helped new members gradually feel comfortable participating as they desired. They realized the extent to which the community was available to them, how they might integrate into the community, and how the community might integrate into their work.

Identifying commonalities. As members encountered interactions in the space, they could see commonalities with the other members. As one member (M-12) described*, "I feel like there's a lot of like-mindedness between all the people that come and go out of [WelCom]. It's kind of a tie that binds, because our work environment here is very non-typical…As I walk into [WelCom], everybody is kind of in the same boat."* Their interactions often reflected the challenges they faced: *"We talked about bad clients, we talked about contracts, we talked about the ability to recognize self-serving behavior among the business support infrastructure community (M-1)."* Many recounted challenges and frustrations of being remote or freelance. For example, one remote worker (M-4), after returning from a work trip, vented to several others at WelCom about not having a clear job description, feeling unappreciated as the only remote worker in her organization, and missing promotion opportunities. Those who were also

remote workers were able to relate. Freelancers used the listserv for help finding health

insurance or locating reliable sources for website development or other technical needs.

Members often commiserated about having the same challenges themselves. There was *"an*

excellent air of respect between everyone here, because we're all kind of in the same boat (M-

12)," making the community a safe space to share their concerns with empathetic others. In

addition to having similar challenges, many of them also shared values around the importance

of autonomy, flexibility, entrepreneurial spirit, and resource-sharing—*"They wanna work the*

way that I wanna work (M-12)." Each commonality they encountered reinforced the SOC.

   Perceiving potential. As members observed the community in action, they imagined new

possibilities for themselves. The community potential was often displayed in the listserv, where

members frequently exchanged emails seeking and receiving help, ranging from asking where

to buy ethically raised pork to seeking help to move a couch. One member (M-5) expressed

gratitude in an email for benefits she received being at WelCom:

> *"I wanted to really thank everyone again for making WelCom such an amazing space.
> I've just been reflecting lately on how important WelCom has been for me personally...
> In the (relatively short) time I've been a member, WelCom members have come to my
> aid in the following ways:*
> - *Brought me gas when my car ran out in the middle of a busy intersection*
> - *Gave me a ride when my car was towed (I seem to have a lot of car issues)*
> - *Helped with recommendations on realtors/mortgage companies*
> - *Helping me with personal financial planning*
> - *Helping me with general law school thinking*
>
> *More importantly though, WelCom has been an incredible base of social support and
> friendship. I've been training for a 5k with one member, went on vacation to Jamaica
> with another, and generally have met amazing people here. I just wanted to flag the
> value that WelCom has for me, way beyond the physical space and amenities.*
>
> *So...thanks! I look forward to us continuing to work together to find the right solutions
> to keep WelCom solvent and sustainable."*

This email prompted several responses with similar messages. Members regularly asked for

help on the listserv, and were usually answered within a few hours, often with more offers than

needed. Even for those not actively engaged in the community, simply observing this help

giving and receiving *"actually helps foster a sense of community (M-13)."* Similarly, some of

the members did not participate in many of the social activities, but still felt that *"it's neat to*

know that they're there (M-12)." The perceived potential enabled members who could not or

chose not to actively participate to still feel a SOC. As one member (M-8) described, *"I feel I*

have the opportunity to get as much community as I want." The potential value of the

community was plainly evident and available through the frequent social activity in the space.

   Summary. The process of encountering involves members substantiating their endorsed

SOC through encounters of community-enabling social norms, shared commonalities, and

potential benefits. The basis for the SOC becomes learning what it means, or what it can mean,

to be a part of the community, turning the vision they collectively endorsed into a plausible

potential for each member. The co-constructed nature of the encounter unfolds as some

members demonstrate the potential of community through their actions, and others encounter

and make sense of the encountered actions as constituting a SOC that they can then claim.

<u>*Engaging*</u> *in community activity*

   The third interact consisted of actual engagement in behaviors constitutive of a SOC.

Because active community engagement is voluntary, and not rigidly enforced, it more

genuinely yields a SOC. In other words, their acting like a community shows how the members

<u>want to</u> engage with each other rather than how they feel <u>obligated to</u> engage with each other.

Our coding revealed three primary forms of engaging that fostered SOC: forming shared routines, participating in social events, and accepting community responsibilities.

Forming shared routines. One way that a SOC was enacted was by developing routines involving other members—which led to experiencing *"more permanence to a coworking community than there would be in simply meeting up at the coffee shop every so often (M-14)."* During field observations, members had routines around when they came in, where they sat, and when/with whom they would take coffee and lunch breaks. The consistency of these routines facilitated the social bonding, as M-11 described: *"It's easier to form friendships faster when it's not just, 'Oh, hey, we met each other once and, yeah, we got along.' It's we see each other every day, even if it's just filling up your water glass at the same time."* One of the maintainers felt that *"the work routine is really the core of this community (M-1)."* Though many of the same routines at WelCom occur in traditional work organizations, at WelCom the members have more agency in crafting their routines. *"You come, you sit, you type, you occasionally talk on the phone, you chat. These are things we would do normally, right. These are our normal workdays. We're simply co-locating, and at the junctures of those things we can be together (M-1)."* The difference is they are not co-locating out of obligation, but by choice. Because members choose where to sit and who to talk to, and are free to change their routines as desired (*"You can walk away from your relationships here without really even having to walk away (M-3)"*), their routines are more personally significant. Members are aware that those who decide to share in their routines do so of their own volition. The SOC is forged through this agentic intertwining of routines.

Participating in social events. Social events at WelCom ranged from holiday parties, lunches, happy hours, salsa nights, movie nights, show-and-tell nights (where they shared projects they were working on), field trips, or getting together on special occasions like watching world cup soccer. Some of these social activities were part of their weekly routines, but others arose spontaneously. These events were usually organized through the listserv: *"People use the email list serve well, and there's a lot of events, and people have both informal and more formal sort of get-togethers (M-5)."* As members attended social events, they developed relationships that extended beyond the workplace. One member (M-1) noted, *"Often one defines a group of friends as people who meet after work. So there's a bit of an overlap in our work in a sense."* Moving from work colleague to fellow community member requires that the relationship have a layer beyond work, *"getting past the identification of a person with their job (M-1)."* Social events outside work hours make that separation explicit, and many of the comments about social events in the interviews mentioned their appreciation for the opportunity such events provided to talk about non-work things, enabling them to discover additional common interests. Social events were particularly effective at fostering a SOC because they were volitional and separate from any work-related agenda, with the sole purpose being social bonding.

Accepting community responsibilities. The third and most commonly mentioned form of community engagement was taking on community responsibilities, such as stocking the snack table, coordinating weekly deep cleaning, dish washing, taking out the trash, or organizing social events. One member described, "*Relatively quickly, I felt this obligation to do something for the space. So I started doing a few odd jobs. Over time, I started doing more (M-3)."*

Participating caused members to *"feel more emotionally invested in it then if I were to just show up in some office and plunk down in a cube somewhere (M-10)."* Like the social activities, these community responsibilities were not mandatory. *"People take the jobs because they want the jobs, or because they want the space to keep going. So that removes a level of pressure (M-19)."* There is a *"conscious understanding that people want to get involved in things, [but] not everyone. So those who don't won't. But if that's the type of community that they want to experience here, with this sense of connection and involvement, having it set up to where people pitch in really cultivates that (M-4)."* Opportunities to serve in the community were deliberately left to the members, rather than having a hired staff do the work, *"not just to make sure that the place is running (M-10),"* but to give members a sense of ownership.

 Summary. A SOC based on active engagement most closely resembles traditional views of community-building in the literature -- bonds are created, maintained, and strengthened through proximity and frequency of interaction (e.g., Cartwright, 1968; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Where our depiction of engaging as a collective action deviates from traditional views of organizational community-building is in the degree of autonomy members had over their participation. The practices constituting a SOC were agentically entered into, and so members themselves were responsible for co-constructing a SOC that would resonate with the community they envisioned.

Process Summary

 In summary, we identified three distinct interacts that independently and interdependently contributed to the SOC experienced by members of WelCom (see Figure 2 for a graphical depiction of the proposed model). By self-selecting into WelCom on the basis of its vision of

creating community, each member participated in collectively endorsing a shared aspiration of what the community might be. This provided an initial SOC for new members, but the vision would need to be enacted in order to maintain that SOC. For members whose desired community experience involved passive participation, encountering the community around them was sufficient for maintaining the SOC initiated by their endorsement. For members who desired more active engagement in community, encountering community norms led to active participation, becoming the basis for their ongoing SOC.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The three interacts were not achieved independently of each other. Members' participation in the community, whether passive or active, was motivated, shaped, and animated by their respective endorsement of the community vision. Without agentically endorsing a vision of community, encountering and engaging in community-like behaviors might feel contrived or superficial rather than genuinely constitutive of a SOC, suggesting that endorsing is a sine-qua-non condition to provide the initial spark for a SOC. Furthermore, the interacts of encountering and engaging are mutually interrelated, as the way members engage in the community is informed by, and subsequently gives form to, the social norms encountered in the community. Lastly, the SOC resulting from the combination of encountering and engaging in community life reinforces and updates the vision of community that members are willingness to endorse.

A critical element of this model is that a SOC requires the interacts of encountering and engaging to sufficiently align with what members are endorsing. Alignment among the three interacts was facilitated by the agency permitted in WelCom's flexible structure. The

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community vision presented at WelCom was sufficiently flexible in terms of what involvement could look like for individual members, accommodating both active and passive forms of participation. So while members *collectively* endorsed a shared goal of community, they were able to maintain an *individual* interpretation of what their own membership would involve. Encountering both active and passive forms of community engagement provided members a sense of "permission" to let their involvement fluctuate, being guided both by their priorities and the norms they encountered. The flexible structure endorses choice of commitment and involvement within the overarching mission to cultivate a SOC, which helps sustain the community over time by giving members a range of possible roles they can assume in shaping the WelCom community, even as their professional and personal priorities evolve. Furthermore, as the limited imposed structure strengthened the sense of member agency, their involvement in the community, in whatever form, represented a personal choice and ongoing endorsement of the community.

Though WelCom members exercised agency in crafting a SOC, it was not a completely agentic process, as each interact was a co-constructed accomplishment. Collectively endorsing community was not just a fortuitous happening of community-minded individuals finding each other. Rather, it was co-constructed as the vision of community was made explicit, members self-selected in, and then reinforced the vision for each other. Actively engaged members demonstrated and made available the potential to be actively engaged. Likewise, passive members, experiencing no reprimands for their passivity, reduced the pressure on others to always be actively engaged. In other words, these on-going interacts constantly re-produced the potential futures by constructing what is "real and good" (Gergen, 1994) in the space.

Discussion

We began this study seeking to explore how coworking spaces offer a solution for the feelings of isolation experienced by a rising number of independent workers. Adopting a relational constructionist approach helped us make sense of how individuals agentically worked together to co-construct a shared SOC that resonated with each individual. Our in-depth study of the WelCom coworking space showed that the SOC experienced at WelCom was achieved through three overlapping interacts—endorsing, encountering, and engaging. In this section, we unpack insights we gained from this study for building community at work.

Building community at work

Our study provides insight into how work organizations can foster SOC for their members. Historically, the structure and nature of work organizations has been characterized as inhibiting a SOC at work (Durkheim, 1933, Tönnies, 1957; Weber, 1921). From our model, we explicate two features that contribute to the emergence of a SOC at WelCom: 1) social rather than instrumental motivation for community, and 2) autonomous structure and practices allowing members to agentically align their community involvement with their desire for community.

The first insight addresses the motivations underlying community relationships. Most interpersonal associations at work exist at least partially for some objective or instrumental purpose. At work, impersonal, transaction-based roles often subordinate enjoyment of others as the reason colleagues associate with each other, which may cause such associations to be void of emotional connection. The people who joined WelCom were not brought together by some externally imposed structure, but chose to be together primarily out of interest in community.

And as members, their involvement continued to be driven by their desires for community, not by role expectations or job requirements. This approaches what George Simmel (1949; 1950) called "pure sociability," referring to when people get together for the aesthetic experience of joy and relief, not for some required external purpose. Simmel asserted that pure sociability encourages people to more fully express themselves, because the person, not the role, takes center stage in their relationships. Pure sociability may occur in traditional organizations, but it is difficult to maintain amidst the interweaving role demands and extrinsic incentives. Some WelCom members may have perceived an extrinsic motivation to join WelCom as a relatively low cost workspace. However, they described economic and functional benefits, such as increased productivity, as appreciated byproducts of having a community, not the principal motivation for joining. The focus on being together to enjoy each other's company was mutually reinforced as described in the process of collectively endorsing the community.

The second related insight is that autonomy and relatedness, two important and often conflicting aspects of work design (Grant & Parker, 2009), can be complementary. The autonomous and flexible structure at WelCom allowed the level and quality of community engagement to reflect members' desires, resulting in an authentic SOC on the basis of "commitment rather than compliance" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 58). Because the choice to participate in the community involves such autonomy, it represents a personal commitment (e.g., Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 2001). Sennett (1977) described a paradox of sociability, that people can only maintain close relationships if they can have distance from them when needed. At WelCom, the loose structure allows members to associate with the people they enjoy, when they want their company.

In addition to WelCom's structural autonomy, it was also important that members felt free to express their authentic selves. It is difficult to create emotional connections with people when portraying an artificial extension of the self, especially when one believes that the others are doing the same (Sullivan & Maniero, 2007). Employee efforts to be authentic are often disrupted by political dynamics that employees must navigate, potentially leading them to portray what is deemed to be valued or expected (Roberts, 2005; Hewlin, 2003). At WelCom, where the community did not overlap with the complex dynamics of a work organization, members described being comfortable acting in a manner consistent with what they deemed to be their authentic selves, which in turn enabled more genuine relationships.

Conceptualizing community work

The co-constructed processes that we have described are indicative of the kinds of social involvement that we label community work. This study portrays community work as an autonomous, interactive, and ongoing process. A community work perspective contrasts with lay views of community-building as demarcated, leader-driven social events or practices designed explicitly to unify members around a common goal or set of values determined by organizational leaders (e.g., Naylor, Willimon, & Österberg, 1996), often with organizational performance in mind (e.g., Manning, Curtis, & McMillen, 1996; Gozdz, 1995). Such efforts by leaders to deliberately build community may inadvertently alienate members who have a different view of what they want the community to be for themselves. In contrast, the organic, day-to-day community work demonstrated at WelCom allows members to be agentic in the SOC they are co-constructing.

The individual investment in the community work process resonates with Kunda's (1992) description of socialization into an organizational community, where "membership implies not only assuming a role, but incorporating it and becoming it, making it a part of one's self" (p. 67). But unlike Kunda's conceptualization of becoming part of a work community where leaders dictate the identity they are trying to promote, and where tension between individual and corporate values is inherent, coworking is a deliberate attempt to reconcile this tension and cultivate a community that does not pull members away from their sense of self. At WelCom, the maintainers have a hands-off approach to governing the space, periodically instigating community work, but not using fiat to ensure compliance to rigid expectations of community participation. Relatedly, research on communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) underscores the paradox of how formalizing the community work of people who agentically come together to learn from one another, and attempting to codify the community's shared knowledge through managerial fiat and formal control, actually undermines the experience of community. Future research should explore how organizations can strategically facilitate community work without causing a tension with members' felt authenticity.

Our research also raises questions about taking community at work for granted as a stable and collective system. Organization theorists have argued that in uncertain and ambiguous environments, organizations should strive to create a system of trust and values, as found in community, that is enduring, solidified, and taken for granted (Adler, 2001; Weick, 2006). A community work perspective suggests that rather than by achieving a sense of closure, a SOC may be more authentically constituted by an openness to continual reconfiguration and adaptation by the members. In a dynamic world with fluid participation, the ongoing

(re)construction of community work should not be viewed as problematic. Instead, it is in the constant working and reworking of community through the three interacts described that the SOC is internalized by the individual. Particularly as organizations become increasingly decentralized and loosely structured, an agentic and performative community perspective is well equipped to describe how a SOC might be co-constructed by organizational members.

Conclusion

The case of WelCom illustrates how a SOC can be co-constructed and sustained through the day-to-day interacts of independent workers sharing a coworking space. By creating a SOC, they satisfy their need for social connection, infusing their work with increased meaning. We see how having an explicit objective to foster community for the sake of community led to a self-selection of community-minded people who contributed to creating the SOC. We also see how having opportunities for members to exercise their agency, in collaboration with others, to participate in social activity and communal responsibility, resulted in a sense of ownership and authentic connection to the community. The autonomy and flexible structure enabled the workers to craft a social experience that corresponded with their personal needs.

In closing, we argue that a SOC is an ongoing, performative accomplishment, and that attending to the everyday life of workplace communities, as encouraged by this special issue, can deepen our understanding of the intricate interpersonal practices involved in constituting a SOC. We hope our research spurs greater interest in exploring the process of community work in various contexts, as well as the growing trend of coworking.

Acknowledgments

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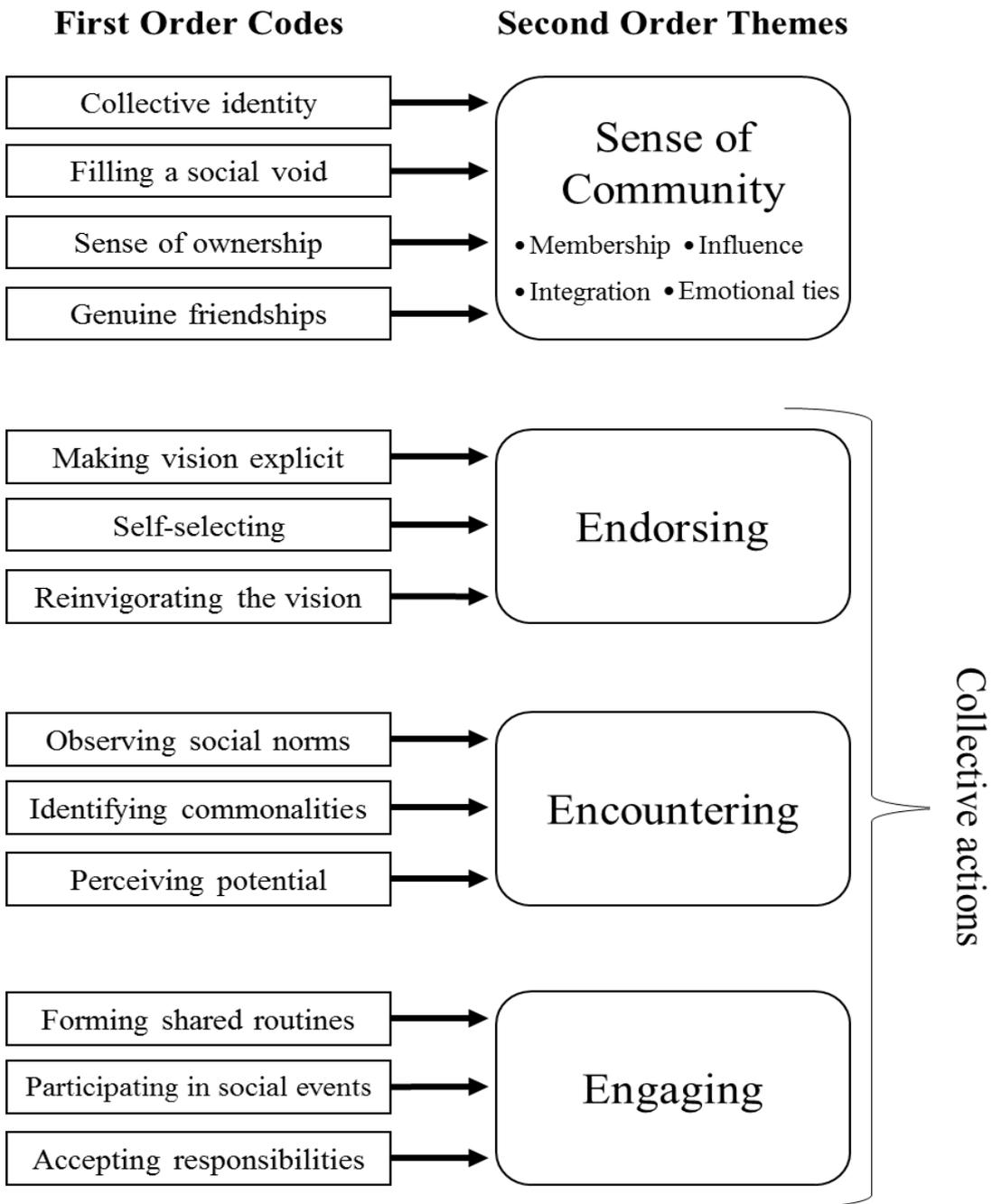Davenport, T. H. and Pearlson, K. (1998). Two cheers for the virtual office. *Sloan Management Review, 39*, 51-65.

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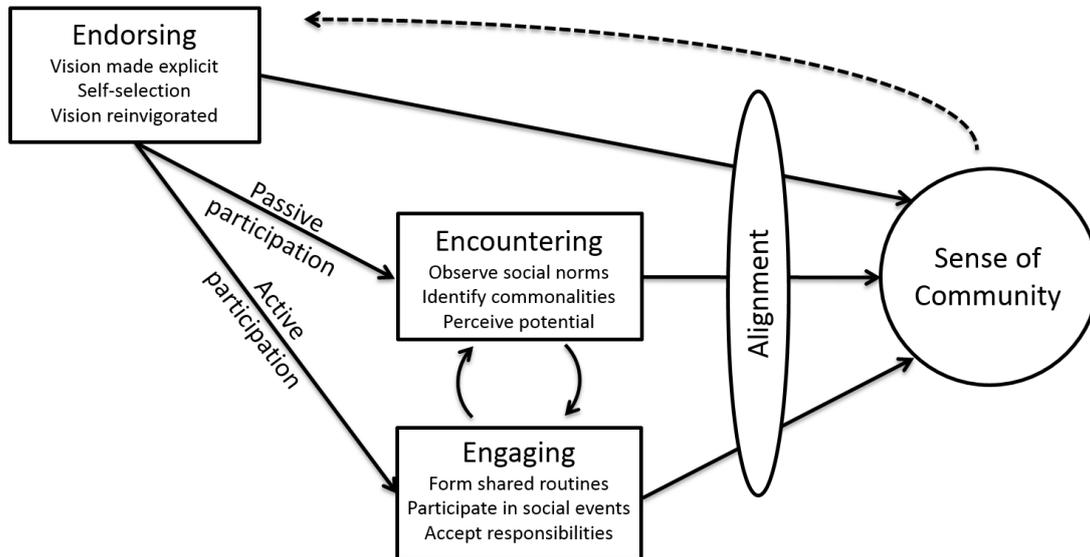
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Appendix

Figure 1: Data Structure

First Order Codes　　　　　　　**Second Order Themes**

First Order Codes	Second Order Themes
Collective identity	
Filling a social void	Sense of Community
Sense of ownership	• Membership • Influence
Genuine friendships	• Integration • Emotional ties
Making vision explicit	
Self-selecting	Endorsing
Reinvigorating the vision	
Observing social norms	
Identifying commonalities	Encountering
Perceiving potential	
Forming shared routines	
Participating in social events	Engaging
Accepting responsibilities	

Collective actions

Figure 2: Co-constructing a sense of community

Table 1: Interviewee Characteristics

#[5]	Sex	Age	Occupation	Employment	Duration
1	M	49	Tech and business consulting	Freelance	4 years
2	M	36	Web design for law firms	Owns small startup	3 years
3	M	28	Content coding for publisher	Remote	3 years
4	F	30	Operations manager in media publication	Remote	19 months
5	F	27	Non-profit financial consulting	Remote	9 months
6	M	42	Writer and editor	Freelance	4 years
7	M	31	User experience designer in health care	Part-time remote	2.5 years
8	M	34	Corporate lending for community centers	Part-time remote	2 years
9	F	45	Health and wellness consultant	Freelance / start-up	2 months
10	M	42	Mechanical engineer	Remote	2.5 years
11	F	26	Software consulting	Remote	4 months
12	M	33	Executive producer in music industry	Owns small start-up	2 years
13	M	53	Environmental archaeologist	Remote	2 years
14	M	56	Software developer for corporate clients	Freelance	4 years
15	M	32	Manager for tax software company	Remote	18 months
16	F	29	Technical writer for software company	Remote	19 months
17	F	38	Graphic website design	Freelance	1 month
18	F	28	Web application development	Small start-up	6 months
19	F	46	Adult and young adult fiction novelist	Freelance	3.5 years

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[5] Members are listed in the order in which they were interviewed.