

“It’s Intentional”: Co-Construction of Transformational Processes and Pathways within and across Hubs of Interdependence in an Urban Community

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Abstract: Beginning with data from a long-term participatory ethnography of an urban corner store, this paper discusses transformational processes and pathways intentionally being co-constructed across an urban community. Within the store and across multiple hubs in this neighborhood, we found six central processes that facilitated change: building relationships, building community, being family, communicating, belonging, and becoming. Additionally, we found that transformational pathways situated in the social, cultural, educational, economical, political, and research realms drove and connected these hubs, creating momentum towards sustainable change. We use the concept of a rhizome to explore how various hubs were connected through these transformational pathways and how redundancy across hubs created new developmental trajectories for community members. Looking across hubs, we found that transformational processes were generated when multiple and divergent discourses were intentionally allowed to remain in tension, rather than being compelled into consensus (creating what we call spaces of dissensus).

Introduction

The long-term participatory ethnography that informs this paper began with one community’s work to address the issues of “food deserts” (Pothukuchi, 2005) or “food swamps” (Rose, et al. 2009) in their neighborhood and the implications of food access for the health and well being of the community. In the absence of full service groceries or fresh produce markets, corner stores that sell preservative-laden, high priced foods, alcohol, and tobacco products often populate food desert neighborhoods. By selling these items, typical corner stores may exacerbate the social, economic, and health concerns within local communities (McClintock, 2011; Pothukuchi, 2005). Community activists in the Buttonwood neighborhood purchased a local corner store with the intention of turning it into a site of transformation toward healthier lifestyles in a healthier community rather than just a space of economic transaction. Early in the process of acquiring the store, a partnership was established between the community activists and researchers at a local university. The result was a community-university partnership that has spanned two and a half years so far. As a blended team of community based and university based researchers, we first assumed that we would be studying food and health practices. However, we soon discovered that we were studying the development of transformational pathways that fostered new ways of being through the ongoing co-construction of an organic curriculum with new kinds of relationships and new practices in the store.

Our findings indicate that relationship building is a foundational precursor for any change in practice. Additionally, five central processes emerged as well: building community, being family, communicating, belonging, and becoming. We identified these processes first in the corner store, but realized that within the various initiatives of this community-university team, there were other hubs in which these processes were intentionally and spontaneously co-constructed (See figure 1). We found that transformational pathways situated in the social, cultural, educational, economical, political, and research realms drove and connected these hubs, creating momentum for sustainable change.

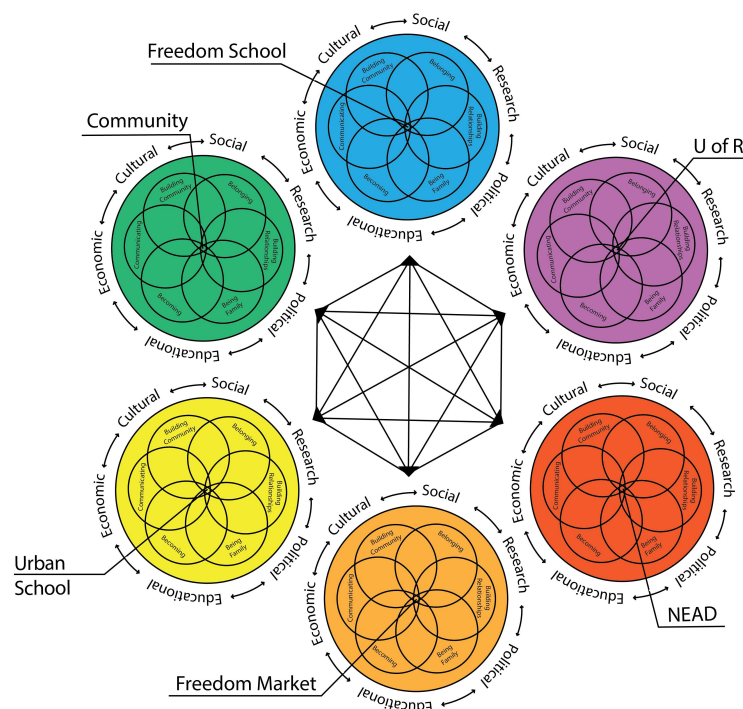


Figure 1. The interdependence model

For this paper, we focused on one hub, the Freedom Market (an economic space Soja, 2010), as it was situated within a complex web of interdependent hubs and practices (see figure 2). Accessibility to our six central processes across spaces, including those outside the store, proved essential. We adopted the metaphor of a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) to develop a model of interdependence through which we explore how various hubs were connected through these transformational pathways and how redundancy in processes across hubs created new developmental trajectories for community members. This interdependence model challenges the notion that learning and change occurs in a one-way trajectory or at a single site. Further, it challenges the idea that consensus-based models are adequate for understanding holistic and sustainable change practices. Looking across hubs, we found that transformation processes were generated when multiple and divergent discourses were intentionally allowed to remain in tension, in what we call spaces of dissensus (Ziarek, 2001), rather than being compelled into consensus, which is a direct challenge to the politically correct neatness that has caused well meaning stakeholders not to address the issues directly.

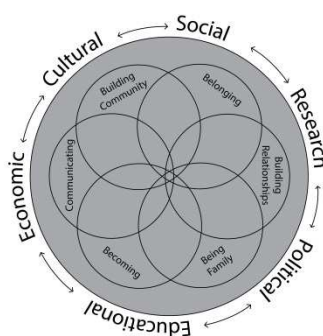


Figure 2. Hub and Transformational pathways at Freedom Market

Our findings provide insights into a new and dynamic way of conceptualizing the community as a multi-nodal site for change, where new ways of being manifest in unique but connected ways. Our goal in this paper is to recognize the value of these emergent processes and pathways and to make the intentionality of these change efforts explicit.

Theoretical Framework

In order to adequately account for the complexity and dynamism that became important in our data, we drew from postmodern conceptualizations of knowledge production and distribution, identity, and change, as intersubjective and networked practices. Specifically, we employed the concepts of dialogical learning (Bakhtin, 1981; Marková, 2003; Rommetveit, 1991), a rhizomatic model of interdependence and generativity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Leander & Rowe, 2006), and dissensus as an ethical political model (Ziarek, 2001). These perspectives allowed us to move between interactional, spatial, and sociocritical frames fluidly, recognizing that they were interdependent and mutually constitutive.

Methodology

Building on the extensive relationships that the community organizers had already fostered, we collaborated with community members to research their own neighborhood, which in turn informed the nature and structure of this project. We followed a participatory action research (PAR) (McIntyre, 2008) cycle of data collection-analysis-implementation-collection in iterative cycles to build a local evidence base documenting the effectiveness of this project, using terms defined by residents themselves. Residents were trained in research techniques and educated as co-researchers, co-authors and, along with university personnel, co-implementers so that they could better gather, analyze, and understand data on health and education issues in their community and participate in developing solutions to community-identified issues.

Our data corpus included two and a half years' worth of participant observation field notes, audiotaped and transcribed interviews with residents and customers, store personnel and families, audio/video taped and transcribed research team meetings, photographs, and surveys. We used a constructivist grounded theory approach for coding and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). As a research team, we each individually open coded data sets, then met as a team to develop categories. We worked together to saturate those categories and to build themes. From the themes, we developed the theoretical models of interdependent hubs and transformational pathways discussed below.

Findings

We found six central processes emerging within and across each hub: building relationships; building community; being family; communicating; belonging; and becoming. Our data suggest that, in each space, these processes were intentionally and spontaneously co-constructed by community members. Further, we found that these processes were becoming recognizable and evident through intentional (albeit informal) "teaching" and through organic processes of distributed cognition and dialogical knowledge construction (Hutchins, 1995; Marková, 2003). Through our findings, we show how the store was becoming a *transformational* space (manifesting new ways of knowing and being in relation) rather than a *transactional* space (transferring goods and currencies in a typical, impersonal retail exchange) and how, in that new space of transformation, learning moved across persons, spaces, and practices.

Building Relationships

The first and most foundational process we identified was *building relationships*. Our analysis led us to define building relationships as a process beginning with meeting people "where they are." It required sincerity, compassion, and a willingness to work *with* people as opposed to working *for* people. Relationships were found to develop through what people said and what they did – embodied and communicated directly or indirectly in everyday interactions at the store. Relationships involved a combination of building trust and expecting responsibility—a combination that generated tensions and challenges that were addressed collaboratively. This process proved salient for store personnel, customers, and researchers.

Store personnel at the Market were known collectively as the "Food Corps." The Food Corps was comprised of neighborhood residents hired to work inside the store as "nutrition interventionists." Although they had all the typical duties of store workers, such as stocking shelves and running the cash register, their primary duty was to engage customers and the community in making healthier choices of food consumption by suggesting healthy options for purchase, and even offering recipes and doing food demonstrations. These practices of situated and distributed learning exemplify teaching and learning woven into the everyday interactions of the community. This is not to suggest that there was not push back from store patrons who were accustomed to established ways of being in this space. Indeed, some community residents (mostly adult males) were resistant to these new interactions at what had been a space in which to "hang out" with (adult male) friends (field notes, 2/2013). Food Corps workers and the store leadership allowed for this resistance and engaged in respectful dialogue with residents who felt this way. Eventually, this play of difference instituted a new practice between "worthy adversaries" (Mouffe, 1993). Although differences of opinion remained, the differences became a source for almost ritualized joking and banter about a store that had become a research site (field notes, 2/2013-4/2013). Our analysis of data over time suggests that by allowing the space and time for

different ways of being in this space, Market workers allowed for a space of dissensus in which differences did not equate to disrespect—hence relationships could be built despite (in some ways on the basis of) opposing perspectives.

This openness to difference also manifested in forms of assistance to customers whose needs went beyond items in a store. The following interaction was recorded in one researcher's notes:

Ted is at the front of the store with Walter (a community elder who works at the store) and Noah (a store employee also from the neighborhood). They have moved away from the activity of the register are talking in quiet voices with heads down. I can overhear talk about "this time" and Ted seems to be agreeing. They talk over 10 minutes in this way. I find out after Ted leaves that he was trying to borrow money – enough to get him by for a bit. (Field notes, 3/2013)

Rommetveit (1991) notes that shared understanding is an interactional achievement that requires a strong degree of "attunement" to the awareness of the other. At the store, no one taught this; it was not available in a manual or how-to book. Rather, participants learned from each other in processes of relationship building. Building relationships involved trust, but trust was something that was earned. It was negotiated, starting with honest exchanges about everyday life. Instances of tacit "contracts" (Rommetveit, 1991) such as the one involving Ted, in which participants temporarily and partially shared perspectives to make meaning together appeared in these small ways where mutual respect was subtly (sometimes delicately) offered and tested. Furthermore, university folks had to be real with themselves and acknowledge many of the perceptions and narratives they come in the door with, which could have been construed as "hidden agendas."

Building Community

The second process we identified was *building community*. As the store manager noted, generations ago, barbershops and beauty salons were traditionally the "hubs" in which the broader community related and communicated—establishing informal communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). With heightened economic disparities in recent years, this sort of consistent, frequent interaction at such community establishments has decreased. Our analyses suggest that Freedom Market, with its model of transformational relationships, has filled this vacancy to become a new community hub. Numerous respondents in interviews and surveys indicated that the store was recognized as a central site for support, reaching across the community. One customer noted that the store is more like a "mom and pop's community store—most of the customers know the staff and they know everyone in here." This perspective reflects the old model of corner stores being owned and operated by folks who lived in the neighborhood, not seen as outsiders. Field notes indicated that it was common for people to stop in several times per day to ask for advice, or seek help with children or elders. One researcher's notes included the following:

A woman walks in with a folder full of forms – she's having trouble with them. She can't reach anyone for help and isn't sure who to go to. It seems to be some kind of credit assistance program. Walter asks if I can Google it while they go through the forms together. (Field notes, 2/2013).

The comfort and lack of second-guessing about accessing expertise within the store suggested a developing network of shared expertise, or an informal distributed cognitive system (Hutchins, 1995; Lave & Wegner, 1991). No one was assigned the role of "comforter," "internet information gatherer," etc. Rather, a mutually understood distribution of expertise evolved over time and through interactions across spaces. Similar instances in which expertise (far outside the "boundaries" of retail business expertise) frequent the corpus of field data, including the following:

- A teenager called from school when he was being sent home so that someone could notify his mom
- A six year-old came by to share his report card with the adults at the store
- A mother called the store to ask Walter to speak to her teenaged daughter, whom the mother fears is getting involved with a dangerous crowd (field notes, 3/2012-4/2013)

This sense of a new kind of community, emerging spontaneously but with intentionality, was observed to be evolving within the store as both workers and community members came to recognize and value the distributed expertise of Food Corps workers, management, customers, and even university researchers.

Being Family

The third process we identified was *being family*. A regular customer described the Market this way: “this is my family from another mother.” It was also called a “safe haven, my home away from home.” This notion of a new, homelike space was observed as children and adults visited the store up to ten times per day, taking items from the store’s coolers as one would a refrigerator in their own home. We began to uncover how the community came to see and co-construct the store as a “homeplace” (hooks, 1990). Roger, the store manager, noted “people have come to trust us with their lives.” He recounted how one day:

A woman who was about to faint due to her diabetes came into the store. She just sat on the stoop, and then proceeded to lie down. She told him she had been diagnosed two days earlier with diabetes. Roger notes, “having recently been diagnosed with diabetes myself, I knew to give her orange juice.” When she was able to stand, she expressed how thankful she was for the first aid provided.

Our data suggested that the Market became a safe haven, a place for nurturing in times of need, and a space in which family-like experiences such as doing homework and chatting about medical concerns were everyday occurrences. [H]ooks’s (1990) notion of “homeplace” is helpful for understanding this dynamic as not only comforting, but also powerfully and politically transformative. That is, “homeplace” complicates assumptions about marginality or outsidedness by pointing out the powerful covert capacities for resistance within spaces from the “margins,” as margins are the very ideal spaces for “others” to “meet.” [H]ooks makes the case that these spheres of cultural practice and sites of resistance have always been there, operating under the radar without recognition or validation from a dominant vantage point. Seen in this light, the store as a site that fosters new ways of being family is a politically and socially potent site for change. This is contrary to the local trend that sees corner stores as places of loitering and illegal behavior, which caused the City of Rochester in 2013 to establish new more restrictive zoning for corner stores to address neighborhood complaints.

Communicating

The fourth process we identified was *communicating*. Communicating builds on the idea of the store as a hub, a resource and a gathering space. Data indicated that the store was seen as a place to get information and to share stories and cultural values, particularly regarding what was going on in the neighborhood. This was found to occur in at least two ways: spontaneously and intentionally.

Sometimes communicative practices at the store seemed primarily spontaneous and organic. For example, on one occasion, a customer stopped in and asked when a community member’s wake was scheduled. On another occasion, a customer asked about applications for local housing. Here, there were no constraints on what counted as a “valid” topic of conversation. Rather, dialogicality was emergent and situation-specific: conversations evolved organically, and they were often personal, sometimes “gossipy”, and very often highly political. One researcher noted the following:

When Walter came in I asked him, “Why were you carrying those newspaper articles in your pocket that day?” He said that he often carries articles with him. He said that, at first, he keeps articles for his own information. He shared that, eventually, he uses the articles to initiate conversations with community members and to challenge what is going on. He referred again to the fact that the CSD is the last in the country for Black and Latino males. “It makes you question what’s going on,” he added. Walter concluded that it is important for him to encourage his community to take a more active role in the education of its youth because “it takes a village.” (Field note, 3/2013)

Walter’s comment points to the other way that communications were seen to occur at the store—as the result of intentionality, a part of the new space/way of being that is being constructed. Another example of this was identified in the way that Food Corps workers distributed Family Nutrition Records to community members. The official purpose of these forms was to track the amount of fruit, vegetables, and sugary drinks families consumed on a weekly basis. The numerical data was being gathered for funders. At the same time, however, Food Corps workers used these forms to initiate dialogues about eating habits and food purchasing practices in the interest of fostering positive measurable results. Through everyday interactions such as these, Market staff would consistently “check in” with customers. As a result, they knew what was going on with families in the neighborhood.

Whether intentional or spontaneous, communicating in this space was dialogic and synergistic (Bakhtin, 1981; Community member, 2012). It was observable as a practice-in-development, filled with tensions, the easing of tension, and the generation of new tensions (Marková, 2003). Engaged participants worked through these tensions as respectful participants in authentic dialogue. To responsibly consider learning,

conversation, mediation, and change practices within the store and among the research team, we needed to recognize the varied histories of the individuals, the community, and the broader sociopolitical sphere that impacted store interactions. We found that concepts from radical democracy, which see difference and struggle as generative, productive, and necessary for ethical political engagement (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1993), were far more effective for understanding the practices our research examined than were political models that foreground normative consistency or consensus building.

Belonging

The fifth process we identified was *belonging*. People who came to the store noted feeling acknowledged for who they were, in a non-judgmental way. A customer told a research team member, “Before, they didn’t do that.... But the store here, I feel you come in here and it doesn’t matter who you are, people are always kind and curious and respectful to you.” As noted above, even individuals with irreconcilable points of view seemed to find ways to be authentic—knowing their views were respected, even if not condoned—in this community space.

Some participants noted that churches and schools no longer seemed necessarily to offer sites for belonging, but that as a community hub, the Market was emerging as one place where they felt this sense of belonging. Further, many acknowledged that this sense of belonging was new to them. In one team meeting, a researcher identified this feeling in himself:

They came, they’re like they’ll just, I want to do something. I like how this makes me feel. I feel at home, some it’s like church...so they want to contribute. So they say how can I contribute to the way I feel. I feel good and I’m matching this feeling. I belong. I want to help. (Team meeting transcript, 9/2013)

The researcher’s reflection on his own learning pathway was telling. It suggested that he was not only observing, but also starting to feel like a part of the community and processes being observed. The boundaries between roles and places were in flux or tension, but the desire to belong and to be part of the change processes came through. This sense of nascent processes is a key factor in our sixth process: becoming.

Becoming

The last process we identified was *becoming*. Becoming implies the sense of change going on in the store and in the community (what we have identified as a shift from the transactional to the transformational). We found that this process was taking place at multiple levels—within individuals, among customers at the store, among the community members who work in and run the store, and among university research partners who found our roles evolving in unexpected ways. An employee of a local community development organization who started working in the store explained:

I found myself at the store more and more. I no longer wanted to just come to the store, I wanted to be part of the store. As I visited more, I found what was supposed to work for our community members was working on me as well. My role transitioned from being served to now serving. So how does one go from being the educator to being educated? No longer do I have an extended hand, but now a connected one. (Memo, 3/2013)

As community members themselves, the community activists who purchased the store and the Food Corps members placed high value on the human capital of this community, and held high expectations for the community’s capacity to come to know and understand what needed to be done for lasting, substantive change. For them, the store was a restorative space that could help the community “get itself back in order” (because perceptions from insiders and outsiders suggested that it had been out of order for too long). Although they drew from local traditions to enact these processes of change, store leaders made this space intentionally creative and new. They explored opportunities for fresh ways of keeping people engaged through creative expression and ways of combining marketability with ethics—being very “cutting edge” and yet very “old school” (field notes, 9/2012; 2/2013). Store staff were observed to consistently engage the community in creative ways to celebrate successes, and in ways to mediate problems through restorative justice practices so that consequences were fairly meted out for failures to be responsible to the newly developing, shared expectations of the emerging vision, or for contradicting the central values that were being solidified.

This double sentiment, of both old school practical wisdom and almost metaphysical attention to care of the other, might seem at first to be contradictory. Our analysis indicates, however, that such simultaneity of difference is a regular component of the agonistic, dialogical practices that took place here, and were part of what fueled its transformational capabilities and hence cleared new pathways.

Interdependent Nodes and Transformational Pathways

Within and across hubs, we identified transformational pathways. We found that the store was a social space; that it built on cultural practices of food as well as practices of restorative justice (“good food for good people”); that it created economies through opportunities for the dollars earned in the community to stay in the community; that politics and policies framed the everyday business of the store and many of the conversations, from school policies to drug laws; that it was an educational space where homework was done, forms were completed, and job training took place; and that it was a research site (as noted on the flyer posted on the door and on the side of the cooler) where community practices and processes of transformation were documented. We argue that nurturing and making these pathways explicit enervates the hubs by creating momentum toward change. One researcher observed at a meeting:

I just want to point out that it’s not just spontaneously transformational, right, it’s intentional. Because initially coming in they were standoffish, back, but now they come in with their problems, whether it’s cultural, social, economics...coming to understand the value of being within your neighborhood (team meeting transcript, 2013)

The transformational pathways we identified were not static, but rather dynamically interconnected to, and affected by, the different hubs within the whole rhizomatic network.

We came to our conceptual frameworks as a result of ongoing and collaborative attempts to make sense of our data. We often found ourselves struggling to find terms for the complexities and overlapping processes and ways of meaning making we were seeing. Dialogicality served to make sense of how meaning was constructed between and among persons, spaces, and times. We found that Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of the rhizome, based on the underground system of nodes, roots, and shoots (what one community members refer to as grass roots), helped to make sense of the ways in which the store, local schools, and other organizations (see figure 1) appeared to be distinct and separate, but actually had complex subterranean connections. The rhizome gave us a metaphor with which to explain how new ideas “took off” in new and unexpected directions, developing into new hubs or nodes that functioned alone, but remained connected to the store and the community. We propose that these “hubs of interdependence” stand in contrast to the ideologies of independence that drive many policies, social structures, and notions of family in the United States. For example, we found that economies in the store were connected with the community development organization across the street and the lives of community members. Likewise, the cultural framework of the Freedom School, with the foundation of the nine principles of *nguzo saba*, was present in the store through service, unity, and community. Further, community members and parents at the school have become co-researchers along with university faculty and students, who use community-defined evidence to inform practices, to present together at conferences, and to write grants.

Conclusion

We have presented the story of just one interdependent hub – the Freedom Market – to illustrate how new ways of being a customer, a community member, and a researcher evolved through the interactions at a corner store that was far from typical. Our research began at this store, but crossed into new spaces, as six common processes were nurtured across other hubs in the community. Our data demonstrate how, in each space, these processes were intentionally and spontaneously co-constructed by community members and university researchers. Furthermore, we suggest that movement across these hubs creates “transformational pathways” toward a larger activist network. We found that these “travels” constituted new developmental trajectories through which community members constructed new and changing ways of being, in community, and suggest that by making these practices explicit, other community researchers can develop transformational pathways relevant to the communities they serve. We must also balance quantitative data with qualitative data to give greater insight into the “why” at the same time balance research with implementation strategies that are informed by real time data.

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