

COMMUNITY CHANGE

Social Imaginaries, Shared Citizen Action, and the Meanings of “Community”

Lyusyena Kirakosyan

Virginia Tech, Institute for Policy and Governance,
Blacksburg, Virginia, USA
lyusyena@vt.edu

Abstract: Community has been considered a person’s natural home by many thinkers. Nonetheless, scholars, practitioners, and the general public have not yet developed a shared conception of what community means. This article considers some of the different ways that speakers in the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance Community Voices (CV) initiative have conceptualized “community” in their talks. In the relevant academic literature, as in the CV talks, community has been viewed alternately as place, belonging, and practice. In this article, each of these conceptions are analyzed in light of the existing literature, and overlaps among them are expressed. These conceptions reveal diverse ideas of “community” and the implications of such ideas for grassroots citizen involvement and for social imaginary. By taking a closer look at the link between the imagination and action and applying Taylor’s (2004) and Ricoeur’s (Landridge 2006; Foessel 2014) conceptions of the social imaginary, it is concluded that the stories shared on the CV stage about local citizen action show how imagination can help us understand how we belong and how we create change through our individual and collective stories.

Keywords: conceptions of community, social imaginary, community action, community change

Understanding the factors that comprise communities and how they work is crucial for understanding our individual and collective lives since, as Giuffre (2013) has noted, “while we make communities, communities also make us” (79). Neither scholars nor practitioners or the general public have developed a shared conception of what community means: “community is something almost everyone feels strongly about, but few can agree upon what it is” (Cocke, Newman, and Salmons-Rue 1993, 13). While some thinkers (for example, MacIntyre 2007) have contrasted individualism and community in an effort to distinguish the latter more sharply, others have argued that contemporary community presupposes individualism (Blackshaw 2010; Delanty 2003). Drawing on Bauman and Foucault, Blackshaw (2010) has suggested that we are attracted to community to be entertained, instructed, enlightened, and surprised: “community offers us new ideas about how to live, as well as inspiration, moral lessons, comfort and tales of the lives of others and how these might inform how we might live ourselves”

(Blackshaw 2010, 17).

However, some social scientists have come to dismiss the relevance of community, since we all are so mobile and face-to-face communication became unnecessary; while others suggest that place-based communities gave space to interest-based communities (Bell and Newby 1971). In this article, the many different ways that speakers of the Virginia Tech Institute for Policy and Governance Community Voices (CV) initiative¹ have conceptualized “community” in their talks given and recorded over a period from 2011 to 2013 are considered, which were transcribed for a subsequent analysis. These talks are supplemented by other written materials published by the speakers elsewhere, to help clarify their arguments and add important contextual details. The CV speakers’ arguments are grouped into shared themes and examined the implications of the diverse conceptions of “community” for shared citizen action. Moreover, as imagination plays an important role in the shaping of action (Foessel 2014), a closer analysis of the link between the imagination and action is given. Community action means active citizen participation, which Blackshaw (2010) has identified as an amalgam of relationships of conflict, cooperation, confrontation, and change. I do not offer normative prescriptions or pretend to resolve the debate concerning how best to conceive of communities; instead, I use the speakers’ perspectives and experiences to comment on the ongoing scholarly discussion of these concerns.

Conceptions of Community

Bell and Newby (1971) analyzed more than 90 definitions of “community” and found only one common element among them: people. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the majority of the conceptions they examined also included a geographic area, common ties, and social interaction, but views diverged thereafter (Ibid). This article draws on some of the different ways that Community Voices speakers have conceptualized “community” in their talks. In the relevant academic literature, as in the CV talks, diverse ways of conceptualizing how individuals live together overlap and each intersecting perspective captures a key attribute or facet of the phenomenon of community. For their part, Community Voices speakers have viewed community alternatively as place, belonging, and practice, which is discussed below.

Community as place

Social scientists have lately viewed the “need for community” and the importance of place in people’s lives as major concerns (Phillipson and Thompson 2008). Borrowing from Edward Soja, Gieryn (2000) has suggested defining place as not only the built environment, but also the ways in which those structures are “interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined” (465). For Gieryn, built environments are unavoidably contested and are shaped over time by those who inhabit them (Ibid). Giuffre (2013) has similarly argued that space should be conceived not only in geographical but also in social terms. In this view, the distance between two people may be measured in terms of geographic proximity as well as social ties (Ibid). When one conceives of community as geographical space, one assumes the primary significance of face-to-face relations that “foster feelings of security, commitment, and belonging” (Blackshaw 2010, 96). A sense of place deeply informed Tal Stanley’s², Beth Obenshain’s³, and Anthony Flaccavento’s⁴ talks in the CV series.

In his talk, Stanley (2012) argued that the ongoing interaction of nature, built environments, history, and culture shaped places in complex ways. He acknowledged that these locations taught that our interdependency and justice were built and enacted “within lived relationships with the natural environment, with other individuals, with groups, but also in relationships with the history and culture of a place, as well as with the distant future of a place” (Stanley n.d., 21). He contended that responses to economic decline and social injustice should be rooted in place and offered two examples of what he had in mind. In one illustration, the tiny community of Meadowview in Southwest Virginia came together to raise \$850,000 in just 6 months to match a federal grant for the construction of a Health Clinic and Community Center for its population. As a second example, Stanley cited a community in Caretta, West Virginia that formed “Big Creek people in action” to build a more vibrant economy and democracy for its citizens and to realize social justice. He argued that the struggles, successes, and challenges in these communities helped to bind people within them together in a search for answers that are consonant with their localities’ history and place.

In her CV talk, Beth Obenshain (2011) reflected on how long-term resident families develop a deep commitment to their heritage and shared history. She reflected upon building a community, shared aspirations, and commitments and preserving the rich Appalachian heritage. Whether through land conservation, public park development, or even accessing local government officials, Obenshain argued that initiatives that preserve and honor a given area’s heritage represent important ways to bind individuals to their communities. While such efforts are difficult, if not impossible to sustain if undertaken individually, they are far more attainable when citizens join forces to pursue them. In 1998, Obenshain, together with Lesley Howard, a Land Trust board member, and other volunteers, developed a land trust in the New River Valleys. After conducting individual interviews with leaders across the region to determine the need for a land trust, it became clear that an active land trust could make a significant difference in the landscape of the region.

Some scholars see communities as unable to resist the forces of economic globalization (Delanty 2003; Smith 2001) that are characterized by increasing commodification and marketization of goods and services. In contrast, Anthony Flaccavento (2011) emphasized the importance of creating and sustaining resilient communities in Appalachia, in the face of globalization. He reflected on the relationships between global and local meanings of place that have redefined existing ties among community residents and created new social relations and have often benefitted the few while harming many. Flaccavento argued that as the amount of productive land has shrunk almost four times across the nation and Appalachian coal has become less competitive internationally, agricultural and coal-mining job opportunities have declined dramatically in the Southeast, weakening local economies and communities. Accordingly, Flaccavento observed, individuals in those areas have become less productive, less wealthy, and less content. He advocated for local, place-based initiatives to rebuild the wealth and resilience of negatively affected communities, through engaging farms, forests, food, and people. With groups that included strong environmentalists and economic developers from the Chamber of Commerce concerned about the poor economy in the region, Flaccavento suggested redefining what a healthy economy and economic development mean, and promoting sustainable logging and local, organic produce. One example of such an effort is

tobacco farmers in southwest Virginia who have converted their acreage from raising tobacco to growing organic vegetables, since demand for tobacco has declined.

In sum, Stanley's, Obenshain's, and Flaccavento's talks showed how place-based communities may serve as a potent organizing ideal and a force behind coping strategies among community members. As the talks emphasized, such strategies helped the community members to counter the neoliberal drive that encouraged them to view themselves as consumers of services, rather than participants and decision-makers, along with an associated move towards individualization from more collective concerns. Although some scholars dismiss the relevance of community as place due to the forces of social mobility and globalization (McLuhan and Webber as cited in Bell and Newby 1971), it remains, as Charles Taylor has suggested, an important site for building and maintaining social networks, and thereby assisting in the promotion of social inclusion (as cited in Phillipson and Thompson 2008). As macro-level economic, political, and socio-cultural forces exert competing powers over community life, individuals express various forms of resistance to those forces, resistance that may be overt and obvious, or subtle and embedded in the practices of everyday life. The place-based conception of community may overlap with one that emphasizes a sense of shared identity, particularly in the case of places where many of those who live there earn their living from the same industry, as in the case of the mining or farming communities.

Community as Belonging

Contemporary societies offer numerous possibilities for belonging based on religion, nationality, ethnicity, lifestyle, and other characteristics. This range of choices has created innovative kinds of communities (Delanty 2003). The definition of "community" can become an exclusionary act when the benefits of belonging to a particular group are denied to those who do not belong. Giuffre (2013) has argued that communities react differently to outsiders, accepting some and refusing to assimilate others. Consequently, Blackshaw (2010) has critically deconstructed a simply positive view of community arguing that, "the bright and the dark sides occupy parallel universes in any community milieu" (151). Amartya Sen has similarly previously argued that the illusion of a singular communal identity often leads to physical violence, giving an impression that it is hate that holds some groups together (as cited in Blackshaw 2010).

The rapid growth of social media has created new spaces for the exchange of ideas and enabled the formation of many new forms of individual and social interaction (Dozier et al. 2011). With social media, participants have an opportunity to contribute to larger discussions, but their responses need not be immediate. In any case, a group's conversation can be archived and that repository can thereafter be useful for revisiting opinions and assaying available information while also providing a valuable collective history of the views and insights of those who engaged in its creation (Ibid). However, some authors rightly caution that social media is not a substitute for, but rather a complement to, in-person interactions since such interactions alone are unlikely to develop the level of trust needed for collective action (Ibid).

Cohen (1985) has argued that community is symbolically constructed through shared meanings, including the creation of boundaries, customs, and rituals. In his work around belonging and attachment, Cohen approached communities as "communities of meaning," involving two related elements: first, the community members have something

in common with each other; and second, what is held in common distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other possible groups (Ibid). Community, thus, is a relational idea that implies both similarity and difference, prompted by a need to express such a distinction, as Cohen has noted. This leads one to the question of boundary marking the beginning and end of a community. Such boundaries may be seen in very different ways (for example, as physical, legal, religious, or linguistic), not only by people on either side, but also by people on the same side, which constitutes the symbolic aspect of community boundary and are fundamental to gaining an appreciation of how people experience communities. Two of such examples were discussed in the talks by Avila Kilmurray⁶ and Thenmozhi Soundararajan⁷.

Kilmurray (2012) outlined how the challenges faced by a divided community dominated by decades of violence that characterized Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to the late 1990s sharpened the identities and divisions between people, turning them into simplified, if not simplistic, *us* versus *them* constructions. However, as Jenkins (2008) has put it, “The recognition of ‘us’ hinges mainly upon our not being ‘them’,” emphasizing the interdependence of both similarity and difference (20).

The word “identity” has its origins in the notion of sameness or oneness, and in community studies, it is often related to the issue of belonging (Blackshaw 2010). While individual identities are always in flux, human beings nonetheless persistently seek fixed conceptions of self that provide stability in understanding themselves and others (Ibid). As Kilmurray (2012) points out, simplified sense-making around the question of personae significantly delayed the end of the violent conflict in Northern Ireland, while also making it more difficult for the various parties even to imagine pathways to peace. Continuously offering initiatives to challenge such simplification is necessary to create space to introduce different and more nuanced views as well as to allow principals opportunities to imagine a more peaceful community (Kilmurray 2012). Kilmurray’s work suggests the critical importance of small-scale dialogue and trust-building to longer-term change and highlights the role of ideas and of the imaginative capacity of people in a community.

Technology has provided new possibilities for common expression and mobilization and has become enmeshed in everyday life (Delanty 2003). Community Voices speaker Thenmozhi Soundararajan shared her experience using digital storytelling and participatory social media that allow community members to claim personal voice. Soundararajan (2013) observed that “silence is a doorway to violence,” and she has dedicated one of her recent projects to making visible the violence against the Dalit caste in India, that has gone unnoticed for a long time, by providing members of that group the possibility of voice via digital stories. While she grew up in the United States, the original identity of her parents as “Untouchables” has motivated her to adopt that legacy as her cause. The 300 million Dalits in India have long been viewed as inferior and have been consistently persecuted in the existing social order. Soundararajan argued, however, that whether through a song, a digital story, or a film, reaching across oppression and building bridges to understanding is not so much about technology as it is about the heart, or hearts, of a media-maker and his or her collaborators. Digital stories create space for new ways of thinking and talking about important and contentious issues, particularly when a community is divided along sharp lines, allowing those participating to find the humanity in each other and focus on their social

relationships.

In sum, the construction of identities is embedded in relationships, which is crucial to a definition of community. Conceiving community as a population's symbolic construction avoids reducing it to institutionalized social arrangements and helps one view it as fluid, changing, and open to change (Delanty 2003). The organization Kilmurray lead, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, sought to mobilize individuals and groups across conflicts and differences in that province by allowing for the introduction of different views and otherwise encouraging relationships across typical dividing lines. For Soundararajan, assisting Dalits in India to secure collective voice offers a powerful example of how participatory media may help to develop personal connections to address ongoing social discrimination. As Kilmurray and Soundararajan demonstrated, the efforts and arrangements that simply emphasized difference ended up "underestim[ing] the reality and significance of human collectivity" (Jenkins 2008, 23).

Community as Practice

The concept of community as practice is part of a broader conceptual framework for social learning that is located in the relationship between the person and the world (Wenger 2010). "The very existence of community means that there is a competence for learners to lay claim to, something common to struggle over, meanings to define and thus appropriate" (Ibid, 187). We are generally involved in a number of communities of practice – whether at work, school, home, or as we pursue our civic and leisure interests (Smith 2003, 2009). Following Wenger, Smith has noted that in the communities of practice, a group shares a concern or a passion for something they do and collectively learn how to address their shared enterprise more effectively as they interact regularly regarding it (Ibid).

The notion of a community of practice overlaps with that of a network, as Wenger (2010) noted: "Certainly communities of practice are networks in the sense that they involve connections among members; but there is also identification with a domain and commitment to a learning partnership, which is not necessarily present in a network" (189).

Unlike a community of belonging or of place, a community of practice is based on a sustained common practice and mutual learning (Smith 2003, 2009). Wenger (2010) explained that the history of practice, the significance of the drivers of the community, the relationships between its members, and their identities all serve as the resources for learning for both new and old members. A nearly continuous communication gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity, generating a group repertoire of ideas, commitments, and memories (Hodson 2011).

Pam McMichaels, the former Director of the Highlander Center, came to Blacksburg in November 2012 to share Highlander's story. As she noted, Highlander became a space for people from different communities to come together, learn from each other, and then return to their localities with fresh ideas for bringing people together around shared goals. Throughout its 80-year history, the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, has served as a locus for communities of practice dedicated to social justice (McMichael 2012). Individuals from across the country come to the Highlander Center to participate in adult and youth leadership development programs and to pursue cultural work. At Highlander, they were able not only to share their challenges and experiences and learn from each other in their struggles for social justice, but also to create and sustain learning networks.

In 2011, Bob Summers founded TechPad, a 6,000 square-foot co-working space in downtown Blacksburg that specializes in software startups and hosting entrepreneurial events. Co-working has been a growing phenomenon across the United States and globally, providing a professional work environment and meeting space. It is available on a flexible, month-to-month paid membership basis to independents, freelancers, telecommuters, and entrepreneurs who have traditionally worked from home or a coffee shop. As Summers (2012) has explained, TechPad hosts events and activities, such as Virginia Tech Entrepreneur Club meetings, informational sessions regarding entrepreneurship topics, and code-a-thons. Such initiatives foster entrepreneurial development and social interaction of members: “I would challenge you to find another place where people on a monthly basis open themselves up and share their mistakes. There is a lot of learning going on there [at TechPad], and that’s because of the open space” (Summers 2012). Summers shared in his CV talk that he was willing to learn from other places where entrepreneurship has been thriving and transfer these conditions to the local environment, being mindful that the solutions need to be rooted in the conditions of the local community.

In sum, the concept of community of practice emphasizes the person as a social participant and a meaning-making subject in a constant interplay between practice and identity (Wenger 2010). As the stories shared by McMichael and Summers demonstrate, building horizontal communities of practice with peer-to-peer learning among their members has served as a helpful alternative to the traditional vertical transmission of knowledge.

Conceptions of Community and Implications for Community Action

Often regarded as part of community development, community action grapples with the complexities of individuals living together. In this section, the implications of the different conceptions of community discussed above for collective action are analyzed and reflected upon. Such political processes assume an active and participative citizenry, respectful of local heritage and social ties, even, or perhaps especially, when seeking change.

Several CV speakers suggested that no community action is sustainable without understanding the history of a place, its natural environment, the dynamics of power relations among its people and within groups, and its connections to other social systems. Some scholars today argue that communities most closely resemble networks that lack history and are sustained simply through the interactions of men and women (Blackshaw 2010, 15). In this view, networks are “the basic ingredient of all community action” (Onyx, Burrige, and Baker 2009, 2). However, when community is conceived mainly in terms of social networks comprised of individuals, community groups, organizations, and the relationships among them (Dozier et al. 2011; Hou and Rios 2003), analysts capture only the basics of connection patterns, and much information concerning the reasons for those interactions is lost in the process (Newman 2010).

Community action often has its origins in the leadership of charismatic individuals (Blackshaw 2010). As Pam McMichael (2012) noted in her talk, Miles Horton’s and Highlander’s philosophy trusted that people could come together to address their own problems. Horton believed that when people come together to talk about their concerns, there is almost always someone in the community who knows the answer to their challenge or knows where to get it. Accordingly, Horton founded the Highlander Folk

School on the premise that those most affected by a problem could and should lead the effort to address it. By creating a space for people from different communities to come and learn from each other, Highlander has long fostered what social network theory calls strong and weak ties. As Giuffre (2013) explained, while strong ties are formed between individuals who know each other and maintain contact through the same peer group, weak ties are formed between persons from otherwise socially distant groups. Strong ties provide social support, while weak ties offer fresh information from beyond an immediate neighborhood or locus of knowledge and action. Community organizers who come to Highlander return to their communities with fresh ideas and new ways of bringing people together around shared goals.

Community organizing is a vital element of community action. Gittel and Vidal (1998) usefully distinguish between confrontational and consensual organizing. Traditional organizing, which has often been confrontational, focuses on strengthening the ties within a group of people and organizations with similar values and interests. While it may be effective in the short-run, such advocacy organizing may lead to social and political divisions and reduce the ability of different groups to work together. In contrast to conflict-related organizing, consensus organizing seeks to provide or ensure local leadership development, creating community-based organizations and facilitating respectful and mutually beneficial relationships between community groups and leadership. Furthermore, the consensus organizing approach emphasizes the development of residents' capabilities and building bridges between such individuals and those with resources, power, and influence.

The Community Foundation of Northern Ireland (CFNI) has methodically and patiently employed a consensus-based approach to organizing. Building both bond and bridge forms of social capital among individuals and groups with divergent convictions, the organization has used formal and informal settings to create opportunities for dialogue and trust-building across a wide spectrum of local actors. Such new cross-cutting relationships were forged, for example, when the Women's Coalition of Northern Ireland was formed with the Foundation's support. The Coalition has since worked proactively to bring a wide range of individuals with varying political backgrounds into democratic politics, rather than seeking to exclude them. Moreover, the CFNI has brought together political ex-prisoners, victims and survivors of the "Troubles" to engage with one another to create a space for dialogue and understanding for moving forward. In so doing, it has sought to address the issue of divided communities and to promote self-conscious reflection among citizens of all beliefs concerning their values and norms.

Some scholars have pointed to the potential limitations of community action, suggesting that such efforts are mostly reactive and constrained by their local character, exerting little influence toward the creation of a qualitatively different mode of social organization (Saunders as cited in Blackshaw 2010). This criticism seems to rest on a conception of community as isolated and geographical, neglecting the social networks that help to spread change within a community and among localities. Pam McMichael (2012) and Bob Summers (2012) shared several relevant examples of such contagion processes in their talks. In the 1950s, for example, one of the areas of Highlander's work that arose from listening to people from communities across the U.S. was citizenship schools that focused on reducing the high rates of illiteracy that kept African Americans from voting, especially in the South. As McMichael (2012) argued in

her talk, “The objective of citizenship schools was always to connect education to changing the conditions around people.” After completing such training, individuals were able to register to vote and thereby to develop, “the collective power to push for structural improvements in their community.” Highlander played a critical role in the American Civil Rights Movement by developing future leaders who were thereafter active in it. Moreover, the Center played an active part in international adult education efforts, offering support by hosting exchanges and education programs with community-based educators and researchers in Nicaragua and other countries (Highlander 2010).

Summers shared a story in his talk concerning how he adapted and applied ideas regarding open collaboration and entrepreneurship generated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, and elsewhere to Blacksburg’s context. He actively sought Virginia Tech students from different backgrounds to start a student entrepreneurship club and then helped build institutions and spaces for a network of investors, entrepreneurs, and local collaborators to support the development of a risk-taking culture in the region. Although contextually different, the two examples shared by McMichael and Summers together suggest that small-scale and local initiatives can have broader impacts on society and can result in legal, institutional and cultural changes. Arising from general concerns rooted in communities, such as civil rights or economic empowerment, initiatives developed elsewhere must be adapted to local conditions before residents can be galvanized to mobilize for change.

As individuals strive to achieve social change collectively, the ideas they hold about what community is shape the social imaginaries underpinning their mobilization. No single idea of community as place, belonging, or practice can sustain group action throughout a long period. Instead, as various CV speakers have suggested, the notion of community is more complex and must incorporate overlapping dimensions of place, identity, symbols, learning, and practice. As several presenters have articulated, community is what Tal Stanley (2012) called “the particularities of place” — identity, values, traditions, and norms, as well as the social network ties that can result in collective practice and learning. The learning generated from mobilizing and organizing in one place can spread through network ties and partnerships to other communities, where it may be adapted to their local contexts, enriching the collective stories and imaginaries.

Social Imaginaries and Social Action

Cohen (1985) has explained the recent reemergence of “community” as a mobilizing idea in social action by its greater responsiveness to the individuals who comprise it, with their stories, identities, and relationships to other people and places. As we engage with the world, it provides us with many tools for imagination that are essential to the interpretation of our participation in social life (Wenger 2010). Stories serve as an important component of how individuals make sense of the world around them and integrate new ideas into their social imaginations (Cross 2007). In this final section, the link between social imagination and civic engagement will be explored.

A number of philosophers and social theorists have explored the social imagination, or social imaginary, although not always explicitly using that term. Their works are an important foundation for scholarship on sociopolitical imaginaries, offering substance for community studies to connect to broader questions in political and social theory to those in active citizen engagement. Social imaginaries are useful constructs for evaluating

underlying structures of communal meaning but are challenging to locate empirically (Shotter 1993). Langdrige (2006) approached this difficulty by engaging imaginaries through cultural texts, or what he called “discourses of meaning”. In turn, Cross (2007) suggested that narratives and discourses at work provide a helpful approach to the “nonlocatable” character of social imaginaries.

The concepts of social imaginary are built upon from the works of Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor. Ricoeur understood social imaginary as “an ensemble of stories that mediate human reality” (Landridge 2006, 645). He saw the function of imaginary in the practical power to innovate and to create autonomous meaning (Foessel 2014). For Ricoeur, social imaginary could both influence the meaning of an action and guide it, through assessing conflicts between competing imaginaries (Ibid). Similarly, for Taylor (2004), social imagination involved how people imagine their social existence. Taylor explained that social imaginary is carried in images, stories, and legends through which communities make sense of the world, understand themselves, envision their possibilities, and structure their daily lives. As new ideas are introduced into social imaginaries taking root in people’s minds, individuals apply them in the expanding sphere of common action, create new stories, and structure new ways of making sense of everyday acts in response to experienced needs. Taylor suggested that one of the main benefits of studying social imaginaries is identifying the emergence of the local particularities.

Reflecting on the community engagement in McDowell County, West Virginia, Tal Stanley (1996) linked it to the stories of resiliency that made up this place-based imaginary that, as Shotter (1993) has put it, contains both elements of novelty and contest. A number of citizen groups have organized there to forge a future in places undergoing destructive economic, cultural, and political pressures, demonstrating civic leadership and claiming a collective future (Stanley 1996). An example of one of such civic initiatives was an organized effort to halt the dumping of out-of-state solid waste in a landfill in McDowell County. After forming a coalition with other groups throughout the state, the citizens were successful in preventing out-of-state garbage from being dumped in any West Virginia landfill through lobbying the state assembly to enact respective legislation (Ibid).

Similarly, the story of Highlander Center is about justice, equality, and sustainability, and the Center supports ordinary people’s efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny: “The stories of people who come to Highlander have a common thread: making a choice with your voice” (McMichael 2012). The Center helps create spaces where people gain knowledge, hope, and courage, expanding their ideas of what is possible. It develops leadership and helps create and support strong, democratic organizations that work for justice, equality, and sustainability in their own communities and that join with others to build broad movements for social, economic, and restorative environmental change. Highlander serves Appalachia and the South with programs designed to build strong and successful social-change activism and community organizing led by the people who suffer most from the injustices of society (Highlander 2010).

In sum, these stories about local citizen action show how imagination can help us experience identification when derived from engagement (Wenger 2010). Imaginary helps us understand how we belong and how we create change through our individual and collective stories. The relevance of story becomes evident when the communities try to imagine their future and the stories they want to tell about themselves. In such circumstances, imaginary becomes a battleground for possibility, urging us to think

“outside the box” and challenge the frames, mediums, and values to get these stories out.

Conclusion

While the question of how best to define community remains open, interested scholars nonetheless agree that such collectives are significant in our lives. The complexity of community cannot be captured in conceptions of place, belonging, or practice alone, but implies each of these at once and jointly. To develop an understanding of community sufficiently complex enough to incorporate this insight, researchers need to engage with communities not only as objects of inquiry but also as partners. Such involvement will help to understand a population’s needs better, to develop local capacity, and to construct a more comprehensive view of what community entails.

The CV series speakers have contributed to the ongoing discussion concerning community action and development by emphasizing the relevance of their narratives and topics to people’s lives. The stories shared by Anthony Flaccavento, Avila Kilmurray, Pam McMichael, Beth Obenshain, Thenmozhi Soundarourajan, Tal Stanley, and Bob Summers have demonstrated the importance of addressing civic issues through grassroots citizen involvement in defining needs and shaping potential solutions on both local and national levels. To sustain a shared action in the long run, these speakers suggested that we need to consider the complexities around the definitions of community. Our individual and collective imaginaries become essential to how we make sense of the world around us, and how we conceive of our communities. Stories serve as an important component of this meaning-making.

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Notes

- ¹ The Community Voices initiative has featured public talks by leaders from the public, nonprofit, and business sectors since January 2010. These individuals have shared their different perspectives and experiences concerning community building at the local, national, and international scales.
- ² Tal Stanley is a teacher, writer and a tenth-generation Southwest Virginian. He lives and works at Emory & Henry College where he directs the Appalachian Center for Community Service and chairs the College's Department of Public Policy and Community Service. He has received numerous awards and recognitions for his teaching, community service, and work for, with, and on behalf of the people and places of Southwest Virginia and southern West Virginia.
- ³ Beth Obenshain is a Blacksburg native, and grew up on a farm off Prices Fork Road. During the 1980s and 90s, Beth watched suburban developments replace the farms around Blacksburg, and developed a great concern over a possibility of her family legacy becoming a housing development. Beth sought ways to protect the land and became motivated to help farmers and landowners in the New River Valley preserve their livelihoods and Virginia's heritage.
- ⁴ Anthony Flaccavento is an organic farmer near Abingdon, Virginia, in the heart of Central Appalachia. He has been working on community environmental and economic development in the region for almost three decades. In 1995, he founded Appalachian Sustainable Development, which became a regional and national leader in sustainable

economic development and has had a major influence on the Southwest Virginia economic landscape.

⁵ New River Land Trust was founded in 2002 as a non-profit conservation group based in Blacksburg, with the purpose to encourage landowners to preserve land using voluntary easements, a voluntary legal restriction on the land, which permanently protects land from development while still allowing the landowner to continue all traditional uses of the land such as farming. The owner can also give the land to children or sell it; in either case the easement guarantees the land will remain as open space.

⁶ Avila Kilmurray is a peacebuilder and community foundation leader from Northern Ireland. She served in projects and initiatives related to social justice work, global peace making, and the Northern Ireland peace process. She served as a Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland for two decades, with a particular interest in community development, peacebuilding, and women's issues.

⁷ Thenmozhi Soundararajan is a singer, writer and transmedia artist. Growing up as an Indian Untouchable in the United States, she was driven to tell the stories of marginalized communities through digital storytelling. In India, Untouchables are the group at the very bottom of the social structure and experience many hardships, because of their social position. Thenmozhi has been engaged in digital storytelling creation and training for over 15 years and has worked with local youth and adult groups to build personal stories of health and community in the New River Valley in the period 2011-2013.

⁸ Pam McMichael first became associated with Highlander as a long-time activist and organizer in Louisville, Kentucky. For decades now, Pam's organizing and cultural work have focused on connecting people and issues across difficult divides, with particular focus on helping build a strong racially just movement.

⁹ See, for example, works of Benedict Anderson, Jacques Lacan, Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Paul Sartre, Charles Taylor, Ludwig Wittgenstein and others.