




8-23-2019

Cultivating Connection: A Conceptual Model Identifying Facilitating and Inhibiting Factors across three levels of Community

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Since the time of this research, the world has undergone a global pandemic that has changed the way we are able to build community and cultivate connection in our lives. Though this work was done primarily from the lens of building in-person connection and community, many of the themes and factors included in this framework can and should be considered as we reimagine our sense of community connection in a COVID world.

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Cultivating Connection: A Conceptual Model Identifying Facilitating and Inhibiting Factors across three levels of Community

Abstract

In a world that is more virtually connected than ever before, social connection is waning at an alarming rate. Extensive research has demonstrated the importance of individuals' connection to others, and community, as central for holistic well-being. In this paper, I build a bridge between positive psychology and community psychology. I introduce a recipe for authentic human connection (AHC) and present a 3x3x3 conceptual model that explores how AHC shows up at three levels of community: micro-communities of dyads and families, meso-communities of workplaces and schools, and macro-communities of neighborhoods, cities, and countries. For each level of community, I identify facilitating factors for AHC. These include eye contact, listening, virtue, psychological safety, psychological capital, play, social capital, ritual, and sense of place. I also explore inhibiting factors for AHC such as unconscious bias, fear, social and cultural norms, power structures, competition, instability, inequality, mistrust, and physical environment. Drawing on the rich resource of positive psychology, I close my paper by presenting three strategies for individuals to cultivate authentic human connection across all levels of community.

Keywords

community, connection, wellbeing, COVID, loneliness, workplaces, organizations, schools, communities

Disciplines

Community Psychology | Health Psychology | Human Factors Psychology | Industrial and Organizational Psychology | Leadership Studies | Mental and Social Health | Multicultural Psychology | Organization Development | Other Psychology | Other Social and Behavioral Sciences | School Psychology | Social Work

Comments

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Inhibiting Factors across three levels of Community

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University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Isaac Prilleltensky

August 1, 2019

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Keywords: community psychology, positive psychology, conceptual model, authentic human connection, community connection, inhibitory factors, facilitating factors, strategies

Acknowledgements

With the spirit of Ubuntu, I am humbled to reflect on all the communities that have supported my journey this year and shaped me into the person I am today.

I thank my Mom and Dad, each of my grandparents, and all my aunts and uncles who have showed me unconditional love and support throughout my life. Thank you to my husband Carlos for your devoted partnership: your love, support, and acts of service make my dreams come true. I am grateful for, and inspired by, each of my siblings Ben, Josh, David, and Leah, my precious nieces Madeline and Savannah, and sister-in-law's Megan and Simmy. Thank you to each of my brilliant friends who brainstormed ideas and offered support throughout this year, especially Shelby and Kelly for your editing prowess.

Thank you to Marty, James, Leona, and the whole MAPP team for crafting an educational experience that so completely nourishes our minds, hearts, and souls. MAPPily 14: thank you for so generously sharing your insightful questions, creative ideas, and loving hearts. I treasure every conversation, meal, and hug. You have taught me so much and I look forward to walking together in this next chapter of life. Special thanks to all the people who helped me refine my capstone topic including Mika Keener, Judy Saltzberg Levick, David Yaden, Jan Stanley, and Andrew Soren. Thank you to Carolyn Gray for your APA support and expertise.

Lastly, but certainly not least, thank you to my advisor Isaac Prilleltensky. Isaac, thank you for believing in me and adding value in every conversation. Thank you for challenging me to think bigger and providing support along the way. I am grateful to know you, honored to work with you, and inspired by you.

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Introduction

Chris Peterson, a beloved pioneer in the field of positive psychology, summed it all up with three simple words: *other people matter* (Peterson, 2006). No matter how technologically advanced we become, our ability to live and be in this world is a direct reflection of our interconnectedness and interdependence on others. In South Africa there is a Zulu word ‘Ubuntu’ which roughly translates to “I am because you are.” The wisdom and reverence of this sentiment establishes the undercurrent with which I write this paper. Every one of us is who we are because of the people that came before us and the people around us. Even our sense of identity, the thing that we feel is most ours, is understood to be composed of three elements: our personal, social/relational, and collective identities (Brewer & Roccas, 2001). Our sense of self is directly connected to the people around us and the communities we belong.

In this paper, over the current of Ubuntu, I will build a bridge between positive psychology and community psychology. I explore what it means to authentically connect with others, and I present a recipe for authentic human connection. With a holistic perspective, I outline a 3x3x3 conceptual framework investigating how authentic human connection shows up at three levels of community: micro-communities of dyads and families, meso-communities of workplaces and schools, and macro-communities of neighborhoods, cities, and countries.

For each level of community, I identify three facilitating and inhibiting factors for authentic human connection. Across levels of community, these factors include eye contact, listening, virtue, psychological safety, psychological capital, play, social capital, ritual, and sense of place, as well as unconscious bias, fear, social and cultural norms, power structures, competition, instability, inequality, mistrust, and physical environment. Finally, drawing on the

rich resource of positive psychology, I close my paper by presenting three strategies for individuals to foster authentic human connection across all levels of community: cultivate compassion, give presence, and recognize strengths. It is my hope that by better understanding the inhibiting factors, leveraging the facilitating factors, and practicing these strategies we may intentionally transform all communities to be places of authentic human connection.

An Origin Story: Positive Psychology & Me

Each of us must rededicate ourselves to serving the common good. We are a community. Our individual fates are linked; our futures intertwined; and if we act in that knowledge and in that spirit together...we can move mountains.

—Jimmy Carter, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*

In 1998, Dr. Martin Seligman was elected president of the American Psychological Association (APA). In his inaugural address Seligman challenged his colleagues to shift their scientific focus from a disease model, to one that was reoriented around human strength (Seligman, 1999). He unveiled a new specialization within the field called *Positive Psychology* and dedicated this effort to the scientific exploration of the best of human experience: well-being, contentment, satisfaction (in the past), hope and optimism (for the future), and flow and happiness (in the present; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Rather than a rose-colored-glasses picture of the world, which the name might suggest, this arm of psychology would be dedicated to a more complete, more accurate understanding of the best conditions of the human mind and experience. Seligman motioned that the field of psychology was responsible for not only alleviating human suffering, but also for recognizing and building upon what is right and good within individuals, organizations, and communities (Seligman, 2011).

Today, over twenty years after Dr. Seligman's (1999) proclamation, positive psychology has spread around the world. From its inception, the field of positive psychology has collaborated across disciplines to identify allies in education, healthcare, business, law, media, and other sectors; each dedicated to realizing and enhancing the conditions for humans to flourish and thrive (Seligman, 2011). Incredible progress has been made. Ideas of grit, resilience, and mattering are becoming mainstream. Character strengths, purpose and meaning are being recognized and prioritized in the workplace. Positive psychology has helped to lay the foundation for the science of well-being, and schools, businesses, and even countries are prioritizing well-being among other economic and socio-political valuations of progress and success (Seligman, 2011).

Dr. Seligman's academic home, the University of Pennsylvania, saw the promise of this field and supported the creation of the first graduate program of Positive Psychology in the world. As a leader in this global movement, the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center has been dedicated to the cultivation, dissemination, and implementation of the scientific findings of what makes life worth living. The Master of Applied Positive Psychology, affectionately called the MAPP program, attracts students from diverse professional backgrounds and disciplines: all united with the common belief in the good, and the passion to positively disrupt the organizations and communities to which we belong (Seligman, 2011).

When I learned of the field of Positive Psychology and the MAPP program, I felt my heart open and a flame ignite within me. I have always been interested in and fascinated by people. I love listening to stories, learning about experiences different from my own, and experiencing other places and cultures. Over the past ten years, I have moved from my home

state of Iowa, to southern Spain, Chicago, and finally Los Angeles where I currently live today. In between these physical moves, have been many international travels and domestic experiences. In Xicotepec, Mexico I helped lead a summer literacy program and in Gracias, Honduras I was part of a US-based team that helped to raise money and install a clean water system which brought safe water to five rural villages and over 800 families. I have also worked alongside communities across the U.S. from Iowa City, IA in the Midwest, to Okolona, MS, and rural Appalachia in the South, and New Hartford, Connecticut in the East. I have built relationships and experienced first-hand the power of community in each of these places.

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Iowa, I kicked off my professional career by running a summer camp for newly arrived immigrant children on the border of Iowa and Illinois. In food desert communities on the west and south sides of Chicago, I spent one year as an AmeriCorps service member, leading nutrition education classes and supporting community gardening efforts. I have worked with student communities in multiple capacities, including the Offices of Career Services and Student Affairs, at two major universities. For the last five years, I have worked with Hostelling International USA (HI USA), an organization dedicated to increasing access to travel, with the ultimate purpose of building cultural understanding and peace.

Through each of these experiences, I have partnered with hundreds of teachers, thousands of students, and countless community members. There have been many beautiful moments. I have seen the way across cultures, and sometimes without words, people are able to come together in collaboration, appreciation, curiosity, and love. I have been filled with hope realizing the innate goodness of humanity that resides in every corner of our country and in communities

around the world. In each of these experiences I have witnessed authentic human connection. I have also experienced disconnection, distrust, and the complexity of issues such as immigration, racism, and poverty. In addition to the countless moments of beauty, there have been moments of great difficulty. I have felt helpless witnessing incessant violence, paralyzed with the need to do something, and crippled by my not knowing what to do.

In each of these challenging, rewarding, and ultimately diverse experiences, I witnessed a common thread of beauty, goodness, and wholeness of our humanity. Despite the challenges, hardships, and tragedies, I have continually oriented toward the good. I have believed in the power of identifying and building upon strengths as a disrupter to the more traditional route of identifying and improving upon weaknesses. I have found that my own compass and internal orientation does better in this regard, I feel energized, empowered, and renewed with the potential of what could be.

When I learned of MAPP, it was as if I let out a deep breath I didn't know I was holding. I had found a place where people believed in the potential of the good and were equally passionate and committed to enhancing it within our world. I longed for the theoretical and scientific findings to base my current and future work within organizations and communities. I appreciated the way the field of positive psychology is committed to the whole person, a realization that has informed my own personal model of well-being. Even more, I appreciated that the field was not only concerned with the individual, but also the systems, organizations, and contexts around those individuals. It asks the same sort of questions that I ask: how can we build upon what is good, right, and valuable within a sphere and allow those qualities to shine brightly?

Introduction to Community

It is not more bigness that should be our goal. We must attempt, rather, to bring people back to...the warmth of community, to the worth of individual effort and responsibility... and of individuals working together as a community, to better their lives and their children's future.

—Robert F. Kennedy, *RFK: Collected Speeches*

Positive psychology is dedicated to the flourishing of individuals, organizations, and communities, though much of its scientific investigation and achievements have been focused around the flourishing of individuals and organizations. In my 3x3x3 conceptual model, I venture into the study of community by exploring three levels of community: the micro-level of dyads and families, meso-level of organizations, faith groups, and schools, and macro-level of neighborhoods, cities, and governments. Before beginning a more thorough exploration of each of these levels of community, it is important to explore the meaning of the word community, as well as its historical importance.

The word community has many connotations. In fact, over sixty years ago in 1955, Hillery (1972) documented 94 descriptive definitions of community. These range from social organisms, to physical spaces, and even familial networks. Communities are typically defined as *structures of social interaction* and are united around a shared sense of identity, commonly held group norms, and ongoing interactions among group members (Bowles & Gintis, 1998). They are both relational and locational: referencing a geographical place and a social space (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher & Sonn, 2007).

Community is a culturally relative phenomenon, meaning different things to different people (Hillery, 1972). In the broadest sense, communities range from the families we are born into, the places we go to school, where we work, where we live, and where we play (Pretty et al., 2007). They are intrinsically paradoxical: consistent and stable, while simultaneously intangible and ever-changing. Communities are dynamic organisms, though they are made of individuals, they transcend individualism and harness an extra-individual potential that is found not within people, but between them. In this paper, I am going to explore community in the broadest sense, as groups of humans united around a shared identity, purpose, or experience.

My appreciation of community likely is driven by the rural community in which I was raised. My father's family were multi-generational farmers and my mother's family owned and operated family businesses in a small town in Iowa (Greenwood's Grocery is still owned and run by a second cousin today!) To my parents, and even myself growing up, community was incredibly tied to place. It was not so much of a psychological construct as it was a physical reality of where we lived and the people that were around us. These were the people who went to our church, rode my school bus, and played on my softball team. In addition to savoring times of celebration, I experienced first-hand the incredible resource communities provide at times of difficulty. In times of hardship, the strength of this farming community was remarkable: friends, family, and neighbors rally with beautiful homemade dinners, baked goods, and fellowship.

When I moved to Chicago, I was impressed to see a similar sense of community and village-mentality in an urban setting on the West and South side neighborhoods where I worked. Store windows boasted signs that said "It takes a village to raise a child" and neighborhood affiliation provided a strong sense of identity and solidarity. In these food desert neighborhoods

which face tremendous socio-economic challenges, connection to community plays a buffering role against stigmatization, prejudice, and discrimination (Major & O'Brien, 2005). The power of community is not simply the sum of its parts, but it is its shared narratives, stories, rituals, and traditions (Sonn, Bishop, & Drew, 1999). Place-bound communities such as these exist all over the world. I think of the community resilience I witnessed in Guatemala's Mayan villages, or of the North African Berbers living in the Sahara Desert in Morocco. These are places where immediate family lines blur and neighbors are extended family with whom you raise your children.

As the global economy evolves, for many people this sort of place-bound community affiliation is no longer a reality. Humans have become less tied to a physical place and modern society presents a greater degree of choice in community membership than ever before (Obst & White, 2007). In many ways our sense of community is more expansive than it once was: now the word community may signify the families we are apart of, our groups of friends, colleagues, digital groups we are members, or even transitory communities such as fellowship programs, academic communities, and social/extracurricular groups. Communities have expanded from simply the place we live, to the people we surround ourselves within each phase and facet of our lives. Individuals can belong to multiple communities at one time, and most do.

In varying levels, individuals identify with the communities of their neighborhood, workplace, hobbies and interests, as well as political and ideological groups. A study by Patricia Obst and Katherine White (2007) explored how choice plays a role in individuals' investment in these communities. With a multitude of community options, what role does choice play in one's social identity and sense of community? They looked at three types of communities, with

varying levels of choice: a local neighborhood, a university student community, and a special interest group. Their findings suggest that choice matters and they found that one's social identification with the group and sense of community membership increased as their level of choice was greater.

Sense of Community

We are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep.

—William James, *Conscious Writing: Discover Your True Voice Through Mindfulness and More*

In addition to geographical and relational realities, one's sense of community also serves as a psychological construct that is positively correlated with well-being. In Sarason's (1974) seminal work on psychological sense of community, he recognized this concept may be difficult for the mainstream field of psychology and preemptively admitted:

The concept "psychological sense of community" is not a familiar one in psychology...it does not sound precise, it obviously reflects a value judgment, and does not sound compatible with "hard" science. It is a phrase which is associated in the minds of many psychologists with a kind of maudlin togetherness, a tear-soaked emotional drappiness that misguided do-gooders seek to experience. (pp. 157)

Yet, he held firm in his belief that this sense of community was paramount to one's quality of life and well-being. Whether it was easy to operationalize and measure did not matter, he maintained that people knew when they had it, and equally importantly, when they did not. Reflecting on Sarason's seminal work, Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, and Sonn (2007, pg. 9) capture the essence of psychological sense of community as "the feeling that one is part of a readily

available, supportive and dependable structure, that is part of everyday life, and not just when disaster strikes.”

Sarason’s sense of community theory established an *overarching value* for community psychology and has since inspired nearly fifty years of research and measurement (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In 1986, David McMillan and David Chavis introduced a definition and criteria for psychological sense of community, proposing a “sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Sense of community is made up of four equally important elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Though I will briefly explain the first three factors, in this paper I will more thoroughly explore the fourth element of emotional connection.

The first of these elements is *membership*. Community membership is made up of five attributes: sense of belonging and identification, boundaries, emotional safety, personal investment, and common symbol system. First and foremost, community membership provides a feeling of belonging. Individuals experience a feeling of belonging when they are concerned for others and perceive others are concerned for them (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In addition to this sense of belonging, community membership defines boundaries which serve an important role in the group’s survival. These boundaries dictate the community’s shared norms and provide members with the emotional safety necessary for their needs to be exposed, and for feelings of intimacy to develop. Community membership comes with a shared knowledge of commonly

held myths, symbols, rites, ceremonies, and holidays. This common culture creates social space between members and nonmembers (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The next criterion for a sense of community is *influence*. Influence is a bidirectional relationship. Members must both be attracted to, and influenced by, the group. They must also feel a sense of individuality and empowered to impact the group. Influence is a give and take relationship which works simultaneously. The ability for individuals to influence or contribute to the group, works in alignment with one-half of the idea of *mattering* which highlights the importance of being invited to add value within a community (Prilleltensky, 2016).

The other half of the mattering equation is the experience of feeling valued (Prilleltensky, 2016) and this leads into the third pillar of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community theory: *integration and fulfillment of needs*. Integration and fulfillment of needs is another primary function and necessity of a strong community. Together integration of behaviors, reinforcement of these behaviors, and fulfillment of individuals' needs form a positive feedback loop that builds upon itself over time and offers rewards to members. These rewards could be status within the group, the success of the community, and competence or capabilities of community members. A powerful community is one that is able to match people so that individuals meet other's needs, while they also satisfy their own (Bowles & Gintis, 1998).

The final criteria for psychological sense of community, and the focus of this paper, is related to the requirement of *Shared Emotional Connection* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This factor is dependent on community members' shared experience or appreciation of group history, along with seven other features important to shared emotional connection:

1. Contact hypothesis - the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close or feel connected to each other.
2. Quality of interaction - the more positive individuals' interactions, the stronger the bond between members.
3. Closure to events - the more clearly understood and resolved community tasks, the greater the group cohesiveness and ambition.
4. Shared valent event hypothesis - the more important the shared event is to members, both positive and negative events, the greater the community bond.
5. Investment - investment consists of financial, social, and emotional risk which has been undertaken by members for the good of the group.
6. Honor and humiliation on community members - reward or humiliation in the presence of community has a significant impact on attractiveness (or adverseness) of the community to the person.
7. Spiritual bond - the ineffable, spiritual potential connection that is inherently possible within groups.

McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 14) hinted at the importance of this final element of shared emotional connection, suggesting that “future research should focus on the causal factor leading to shared emotional connection, since it seems to be the definitive element for *true community*.”

The Value of Community Connection

We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.

—Dorothy Day, *The Politics of Compassion and Transformation*

The importance of community connection has been found over and over again. In one of the longest longitudinal studies in history, Harvard's 80+ year study of adult development, relationships were found as the key indicator of an individuals' overall health and happiness (Mineo, 2017). More than money or fame, the quality and satisfaction of one's relationships at age 50, was the greatest predictor of their health at age 80. Director Emeritus of the Harvard study, George Valliant, summarizes it nicely with the simple statement "joy is connection" and suggests that this sense of connection could be the definitive quality for individual well-being and longevity (personal communication, November 16, 2018).

Dan Buettner's (2017) work with the Blue Zones echoes the importance of connection as a critical factor for the longevity of communities around the world. In 2002, with a grant from the National Institute of Aging, Buettner commissioned a team of scientists to identify where in the world people live the longest (Buettner, 2017). Through this effort, five places were identified that are now commonly known as the world's Blue Zones: Okinawa, Japan, Sardinia, Italy, the Nicoya region of Costa Rica, the Greek island of Ikaria and Loma Linda, California; each of these locations are home to the longest living people on the planet. Through cross-cultural analysis and evaluation, Buettner and colleagues identified the commonly held practices and characteristics that could be responsible for the long lives of these residents. These shared tenants make up what he calls the *Power 9* best practices for health and longevity (Buettner, 2017).

One-third of the Power 9 factors reinforce the importance of individuals' sense of belonging and connection to others, with the other two-thirds factors encompassing factors such

as moving naturally, possessing a sense of purpose, and consuming a majority plant-based diet (Buettner & Skemp, 2016). Buettner highlights the importance of belonging, especially to faith-based communities, the value of putting families first, and the need to surround oneself with social circles that reinforce healthy habits. Along with fulfilling our foundational need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), community membership also possesses the potential to positively influence health behaviors (Hystad & Carpiano, 2012). One study exploring the impact of community belonging demonstrates a strong and positive impact on individuals' health behavior change in general, along with particularly strong impacts on exercise, weight loss, and diet improvements (Hystad & Carpiano, 2012). To contrast, individuals lacking a sense of belonging and robust social connections, experience numerous negative effects on their health, adjustment, and holistic well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Social connection is correlated with higher experiences of well-being, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and higher resiliency (Seppala, Rossomando & Doty, 2013). In turn, well-being is linked with a host of psychological benefits including the experience of quality relationships, positive emotions, engagement, and a sense of meaning and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Individuals with high rates of social connection tend to see others in a positive light, as trustworthy and nonthreatening, and possess a positive, prosocial interpersonal orientation (Seppala et al., 2013). In fact, a community's survival is dependent on its ability to promote cooperation and prosocial norms that enhance the average well-being of the greater good (Bowles & Gintis, 1998). Therefore, communities must align the needs of its members, with the cost of membership, and the collective needs of the whole. When each of these criteria are in balance, an individuals' sense of social connection reinforces itself over time,

strengthening the community itself and compounding the positive return on their investment.

In another study, researchers William Davidson and Patrick Cotter (1991) explored the relationship between sense of community and individuals' subjective well-being. Controlling for potential confounds of demographic and community variables, they found one's sense of community to be significantly related with their overall subjective well-being, and these effects were especially pronounced with the happiness facet of subjective well-being. Many suggest that one's sense of community encourages individuals to become more involved in their community, thereby increasing their sense of community and creating a virtuous circle influencing overall quality of life, social support, and community well-being at-large (Sonn, Bishop & Drew, 1999).

Communities are greater than the sum of their parts (Sonn et al., 1999). In addition to their respective members, they also possess additional elements and contextual factors in their composition. The first of these elements, social capital, is a resource that arises from within communities. Though there are many definitions of social capital, there are two key criteria: social capital is a feature of a social collective, and social capital is a public good that arises as a by-product of social relationships. Both elements serve as resources for individuals and facilitate collective action (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000). A second function of communities, social cohesion, is "the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society" (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000, p. 175). Social cohesion is dependent on two opposing and intertwined features of society: the absence of conflict and the presence of strong social bonds. A third function and consideration of communities is the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts that exist within and around them. Just as communities present a sort of spiritual element of transcendence, they carry an equally powerful anchor in the challenges, dysfunctions, and mistakes of their past.

The Evolution of Communities

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

—Jane Addams, *National Collaborative for Women's history*

In our modern society, sociological research suggests that social connection is waning at an alarming rate. Household sizes are decreasing, families and friends are more geographically dispersed than ever before, and rates of loneliness are rising: contributing to one of the leading reasons people seek psychological counseling. Low social connection is associated with hostility, social anxiety, jealousy, low interpersonal trust, low self-esteem, and lower agreeableness and sociability (Seppala et al., 2013). Susan Pinker (2015) captures the current paradox of connection in her book *The Village Effect*, "Some say we're more connected now than ever, mostly due to the internet, and some say we're less connected, mostly due to the internet. Both views are correct" (pg. 10). Pinker hits on a key observation in this statement, at a time when our globe is more virtually connected than ever before, it seems authentic human connection is increasingly difficult to experience.

If we look at the evolution of communities throughout history, we can see the way families and communities have transformed from being socially, economically, and politically *necessary and powerful*, to, in many ways, socially, economically, and politically *optional or superficial* (Harari, 2015). Consider the hunter gatherer bands that roamed the earth during the Paleolithic period. During this time period communities had immense freedom, were relatively self-sufficient, and enjoyed ample time for leisure and socialization. Additionally, with the absence of property ownership and asset accumulation, these societies were impressively

equitable (McMahon, 2018). Communities were dependent on each other for their survival, thus an individual's investment in their community and prosocial behavior was rewarded with life itself.

The importance of community connection continued into the agricultural age. Though farming societies were bound by place, experienced a far greater degree of inequality, and were continuously subjected to threats of famine, war, and disease; one's connection to community continued to be an essential requirement for survival (McMahon, 2018). In the agricultural age, communities were often composed of one's nuclear family, extended family, and what is called a *local intimate community*, meaning a group of people who know one another well and depend upon each other for survival (Harari, 2015). In this period, family networks provided individual's livelihoods, as well as education, healthcare, safety, banking, and insurance. Though trading of goods and services was abundant, the transactional use of money was quite limited and community membership was necessary for survival.

Reliance on community, and one's return on investment in their community changed drastically in the industrial revolution and continues into our modern era today. One of the primary consequences of the technological advancements of this era, is the way capital power shifted from the hands of many families, to the much broader international corporate marketplace (Harari, 2015). The collective culture powerfully influences individuals' preferences. Needs and services such as healthcare, safety, banks, and insurance are held largely by corporations and capitalist entities which are not necessarily concerned with the impact on the individual, but rather on their annual returns. Our modern capitalist society has shifted the great reward of

community investment, to a greater reward of one's personal investment and prosperity (Harari, 2015).

Community Connection in the Modern World

All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., *Making a way out of no way: Martin Luther King's Sermonic Proverbial Rhetoric*

Despite the evolution of community dependence and systemic realities in the twenty-first century, human beings continue to be innately social creatures. In fact, our lives depend on social connection in the same way we require food, water, and shelter. In Abraham Maslow's (1943) famous hierarchy of needs, he theorized that loving connection to others and a sense of affection is humans' primary psychological need, once basic physiological and safety requirements are met). This idea of connection goes by many different names including attachment, social support, belongingness, social connectedness, social connection, and more. As McMillan and Chavis so astutely realized, interpersonal connection does not take place independent of its context. Individuals not only feel connected to others on a singular level, but also on a group level (Mashek, Cannaday, & Tangney, 2007). While initial ideas of shared emotional connection might draw images of dyadic interactions and relationships, individuals also feel a sense of connectedness to their community more broadly.

Communities provide an integration of individuals into networks and structures that provide feelings of belonging, identification, and meaning (Sonn et al., 1999). Whether these are communities of family, friends, colleagues, or otherwise, communities are dependent on a sense of connection *within it*, as well as individual's connection *to it*. These two factors are important considerations for all levels of community.

Connectedness has been defined many ways. Kern, Benson, Steinberg & Steinberg (2015) believe connectedness is “the sense that one has satisfying relationships with others, believing that one is cared for, loved, esteemed, and valued, and providing friendship or support to others” (p. 587). This sense of connectedness and these social relationships shape personal identities at three levels: personal, social/relational, and collective (Brewer & Roccas, 2001) as well as influence the things we do, the attitudes and values we hold, and the way we perceive and react to the people around us (Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). At its core, feeling connected to the people around us, makes us feel we matter: we are valued and invited to add value (Prilleltensky, 2016).

Social connection is defined as “a person’s subjective sense of having close and positively experienced relationships with others in the social world” and has long been known to be a major determinant to individuals’ health and well-being (Seppala et al., 2013, p. 412). According to Google Dictionary, *connection* (2019) is defined as “a relationship in which a person, thing, or idea is linked or associated with something else.” Brené Brown, a leading researcher, best-selling author, and storyteller sees connection “as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship (2010, p. 19)

I build upon these definitions of connection in my own conception of *authentic human connection*. I consider the following questions: what is authentic human connection, where does it live, what factors inhibit and facilitate its existence, and how can we cultivate this sort of connection in our lives? I believe authentic human connection (AHC) is the potential that exists whenever two people interact: these could be close friends, family, colleagues, or neighbors. AHC can also take place between strangers: on a train or plane or in a Lyft or taxi. It is both a momentary experience, as well as a sustained sense of connection to the people around us. AHC is a way of being in the world: it believes in the beauty and goodness within each person. It is strengthened by authentic interactions which give us life and provide meaning. They build upon each other time and enhances one's sense of connection to others, as well as one's sense of community more broadly. AHC provides space for us to share stories, learn from each other, share a laugh, and ask questions.

These interactions have been classified as *high quality connections* by Jane Dutton (2003), the William Russell Kelly Professor of Business Administration at the University of Michigan. Dutton is especially interested in high quality connections (HQC) in the workplace, but these interactions are translatable across various communities. She classifies HQC by four signature features: vitality and energy felt by both parties, mutuality (i.e., a sense of joint participation and responsiveness), positive regard, and physiological changes (Dutton, 2003). These interactions are literally life-giving. They build energy and vitality, over time strengthening the immune system, lowering blood pressure, reducing stress, and arming people with protective factors in the face of challenges (Dutton, 2003). One of the protective factors generated by high-quality connections is the experience of positive emotions such as joy,

gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love (Fredrickson, 2009).

Barbara Fredrickson (2009), a leading researcher in positive emotions, has found that experiences of positive emotions broaden our perspective and build upon each other. Over time, the experience of positive emotions leads to an upward spiral of gratitude, possibility, and openness. When two individuals have a shared experience of love, in particular, their biochemistry and behaviors mirror each other, and both parties possess a mutual desire to invest in each other's well-being (Fredrickson, 2013). Fredrickson calls this phenomenon *positivity resonance*. Her work suggests that in these micro-moments of love, an individual's warmth and openness is both inspired by, and inspiring for the other individual's warmth and openness. In this experience, love lives *between* two individuals and reverberates off each other: growing stronger and amplifying each individuals' sense of connection (Fredrickson, 2013).

In addition to love, all positive emotions bring people together and breed attitudes of tolerance and acceptance (Fredrickson, 2009). Just as positive emotions build upon each other over time, experiences of positivity resonance and moments of high-quality connection broaden our holistic sense of connection to others and community. If authentic human connection is the ideal experience of connection, including experiences of high-quality connection and positivity resonance, as well as a more holistic sense of connection, what are the important ingredients and how can we build this critical resource in our lives?

Authentic Human Connection: A Recipe

We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men.

—Herman Melville, *Wisdom for the Soul: Five Millennia of Prescriptions for Spiritual Healing*

Authentic human connection is both the name of the recipe, as well as a representation of the three necessary stages and their accompanying elements: an *authentic* approach, *human* attributes, and perspective of *connectedness* (see Table 1). AHC begins with an authentic approach: this is the way in which one interacts with the world. The first element of an authentic approach is *vulnerability*. True vulnerability requires a sense of self-love and self-acceptance. It empowers us to be our true selves, with ourselves and with others. It is grounded in truth and honesty: a sense of knowing oneself and sharing oneself with another. Vulnerability requires the courage to truly *be in the arena of life* without knowing whether we will win or lose (Brown, 2012). The second component of this stage is *openness and non-judgment*. These qualities come easy to individuals who are authentically themselves and able to look at the world with untainted lenses. There is a sense of optimism in this quality, a quiet belief in the good to be found within each person. The third element of one's approach is radical *acceptance*. This ingredient celebrates diversity and sees differences as an opportunity to learn from other perspectives. Acceptance is deeply important, and like each of these ingredients, deeply interconnected to the others.

The second stage is centered on the word *human* and is representative of the human attributes necessary for AHC. *Appreciation and gratitude* are the first attributes. They carry a sentiment that says, "Thank you for being your authentic self, and thank you for sharing that with me." Grounded in humility, it is gratitude and appreciation which builds a foundation of trust to demonstrate the value and dignity of each person. *Curiosity and care* are the next attributes and together they create a self-sustaining loop. These build on the trust established earlier and are made actionable through kind questions and active listening. These elements of AHC are

outwardly focused, interested and invested in the other. The last attribute is a sense of *mattering*. This spirit of *mattering* allows individuals the opportunity to both feel valued and add value; in each interaction and more broadly in their lives (Prilleltensky, 2016).

The third and final stage of authentic human connection centers on a perspective of *connectedness*. *Love* is the undercurrent running below the bridges of the aforementioned qualities. Love is the foundation. In many ways, the recipe for AHC is really a recipe for love. Not a romantic love or even an enduring love, but an equally potent love that brings people together, allows for authentic connection, creates meaning, and enhances universal well-being. Emotional connection and affection are the most critical element in social connection (Seppala et al., 2013). Love is the one positive emotion that lives outside the individual (Fredrickson, 2013). It unfolds and reverberates between and among people, and within the interpersonal connections that bind us together. Love unlocks the door to the true *seeing* of another and often this seeing allows one to see themselves in another and another in oneself.

Researchers quantify this sort of seeing by measuring one's sense of self-other overlap and similarity: a phenomenon that further induces a feeling of positivity and connection (Seppala et al., 2013). Ultimately, this sort of seeing leads to experiences of self-transcendence. Aron and Aron (1986) propose that an individual's relationships are positive and rewarding to the extent that that expand one's sense of self. They suggest that individuals' sense of self expands in relationship, to include the other in the self. They believe it is this feeling of self-expansion and transcendence from their individual experience that is so ultimately motivating and rewarding (Aron & Aron, 1996).

At the foundation of a perspective of connectedness is really a recognition of *oneness*: the realization that we are all one humanity, sharing this one human experience. Oneness beliefs appear in many cultures and within a variety of religious, philosophical, spiritual and scientific perspectives (Diebels & Leary, 2019). A perspective of oneness recognizes the way in which we are all interconnected and interdependent: what is good for one is good for all, what is bad for one is bad for all. A oneness perspective allows us to see each of us as part of a larger whole: many parts of one larger superhuman organism.

A study by Diebels and Leary (2019) demonstrates that oneness beliefs can have a significant effect on individuals' concern for the welfare of others, as well as one's general sense of connection to others. In fact, individuals' identities are changed when one holds a perspective of oneness; identities expand beyond the self to center around individuals' connectedness to other living things. A sense of oneness extends not only to other humans, but also to our environment, the other animals inhabiting our planet, and greater cosmos around us. For some this might be connected to ideas of spirituality, but for many it can be simply a deep recognition and reverence for our shared humanity. Authentic human connection allows us to transcend our own experience, honor the dignity of every person, and, even for a short time, become authentically connected to one another.

Table 1		
<i>Authentic Human Connection: A Recipe</i>		
Authentic Approach:	Human Attributes:	Perspective of Connectedness:
Vulnerability	Appreciation & Gratitude	Love
Openness & Nonjudgement	Curiosity & Care	Self-transcendence
Radical Acceptance	Sense of Mattering	Oneness

Connecting at Multiple Levels

We don’t accomplish anything in this world alone...and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one’s life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something.

—Sandra Day O’Connor, *Sandra Day O’Connor: U.S. Supreme Court Justice*

A basic tenet of community psychology is “the need to understand the multiple levels at which a problem can be analyzed, and the multiple levels at which interventions can take place” (Pretty et al., 2007, p. 12). In the following sections, I will combine this tenet with a guiding value in positive psychology: to identify and build upon the inherent strengths and potential of individuals, organizations, and communities (Seligman, 2011). Authentic human connection is a critical element for flourishing at all levels of community: from micro-level communities of dyadic relationships and families, to meso-level communities of workplaces and schools, and macro-level communities of neighborhoods, cities, and government.

In this section, I introduce my 3x3x3 conceptual framework (see Table 2), investigating each level of community and identifying important facilitating and inhibiting factors for AHC.

Each level of community presents many opportunities for AHC, as well as equally powerful barriers. These factors exist at the level of the individual, as well as that of the context or environment. We will explore facilitating factors of eye contact, listening, virtue, psychological safety, psychological capital, play, social capital, ritual, and sense of place; as well as inhibiting factors of unconscious bias, fear, social and cultural norms, power structures, competition, instability, inequality, mistrust, and physical environment. As we move through each level of community, we will gain a better understanding of these inhibiting factors so we can intentionally overcome their barrier to AHC, as well as learn how to better leverage the facilitating factors so we can more strategically enhance AHC across all communities.

Table 2		
<i>3x3x3 Conceptual model of authentic human connection within communities</i>		
Levels of Community	Facilitating Factors (FF) & Inhibiting Factors (IF)	Tools to foster AHC
Micro: Dyads & Families	FF: Eye contact, Listening, Virtue IF: Fear, Gender/cultural norms, Competition	Cultivate Compassion
Meso: Organizations, Faith & Interest groups	FF: Psychological safety & capital, Play IF: Power structures, Implicit bias, Instability	Give Presence
Macro: Neighborhoods, Cities & Governments	FF: Social capital, Ritual, Sense of place IF: Inequality, Mistrust, Physical environment	Recognize Strengths

Micro-level Communities: Dyads and Families

Humans are born into their first community: their family. In both one-on-one interactions, and group experiences, these micro-level communities teach us how to show up and survive in the world. No matter how technologically advanced or digitized our world becomes, our dependence on others to survive is evident from our birth. In the early days of psychology, Harry

Harlow and Robert Zimmerman (1958) explored our innate need for parental comfort through the famous cloth monkey experiment. In this experiment, the monkey's attachment to the cloth mother, over the milk-producing wire mother, laid the foundation for Bowlby's (1969, 1982) work on attachment theory. Attachment theory declares that strong emotional or physical attachment to at least one primary caretaker, is critical to personal development. Interestingly, securely attached children often grow to be securely attached romantic partners (Bowlby, 1969, 1982). The safety and exploration we experience as a baby and child, translates into the safety and exploration we experience as an adult (Haidt, 2006).

Through maturation and into adulthood, our connections and relationships with others transition from being decided for us, to more calculated choices we make for ourselves. Equity theory suggests that close relationships (e.g., friendships or romances) exist to the degree that both parties believe their personal investment is matched by the other (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid (1973). Interpersonal resources such as goods, information, love, money, services, and status are all exchanged in relationships (Foa & Foa, 1980). The data suggests that it is not simply this exchange of resources or social contact that matters, but it is the affective quality of each relationship that is important (Seppala et al., 2013). When positive, these interpersonal resources have a significant impact on individual well-being and resilience. The quality of one's relationships is directly related to their personal subjective well-being. In fact, simply being in the presence of a loved one, or viewing a photo of them, possess the potential of reducing one's perception of physical pain (Master et al., 2009).

Facilitating factors for authentic human connection: Micro-level. There are many facilitating factors that enable AHC in micro communities of dyadic relationships and families.

In this section I will focus on three foundational factors: eye contact, listening, and virtue. Each of these necessary elements provide verbal and non-verbal clues that indicate one's level of investment and presence within an interaction. In fact, human eyes likely lightened over the course of our evolution for this exact purpose: to broadcast our attention and intentions (Emery, 2000). The information we communicate with our gaze, especially emotional cues, served as a great resource for our ancestors' survival, and continue to serve us today in our quest to authentically relate with others. Human eyes have been given the nickname *windows to the soul* for a reason; they communicate valuable information between humans and send nonverbal messages about whether someone is a friend or foe.

Listening is another essential ingredient for both productive conversation and authentic connection. Interpersonal listening involves one person (i.e., the listener) listening to and interacting with another (i.e., the speaker; Waks, 2010). Every person can likely recall a time when they felt truly listened to, and an equal number of times they did not. A feeling of truly being heard results in both effective communication, as well as a sense of validation, care, and even exhilaration (Rice & Burbules, 2010). Poor listening results in the opposite experience of feeling misunderstood, frustrated, hurt, and defeat. Familiar uses of the word 'listen' suggest that there are times when we listen *to*, and times when we listen *for* (Waks, 2010). Consider listening to a person, a song, or the ocean waves versus listening for a knock at the door or the phone to ring. The primary listening function seems to suggest a more passive observance or receipt of information, while the latter is an attentive anticipation or expectation. Active listening harnesses the energy and interest found when listening for, and in relation to AHC, this listening is *for* an opening or opportunity to connect.

Every micro-level community interaction is unique. Good listening requires the practice of multiple virtues including patience, tolerance, generosity, humility, creativity, and curiosity. These virtues serve as tools to allow us to build trust, understanding, and connection. According to Aristotle, virtues become habits through intentional practice (Melchert, 2002). Every interaction presents a new opportunity to discover the appropriate *mean* of these virtues and the more we practice these skills, the more automatic they become. A final virtue that enables AHC is the ability to listen with empathy. This characteristic requires the ability to hear both the content of what is said, as well as the emotions, feelings, and personal connotations surrounding the words (Waks, 2010). Empathic listening is an artful skill that requires an other-oriented perspective, open-mindedness, and care.

Inhibiting factors for authentic human connection: Micro-level. Micro-level communities of dyads and families possess several obstacles that can limit growth and potential for AHC. Fear, gender and cultural norms, and competition are three of the largest inhibiting factors for these micro-level communities. The first of these inhibiting factors, to have fear, is to be human. In fact, our evolution and survival has been dependent on our ability to recognize and respond to threats (Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung & Updegraff, 2000). While our early ancestors might have been threatened by saber-toothed tigers, today's threats are much more likely to be stresses of a psychological, social, or economical nature. Despite the ways common threats have evolved, our body's fight or flight stress response has more or less stayed the same. Due to our evolution, it is our brains' tendency to equate vulnerability with weakness, and therefore invulnerability with strength (Brown, 2012). This inclination to self-protect from the unknown can create an impermeable barrier inhibiting us from authentically connecting with

others.

Preliminary studies suggest that this *fight or flight* response may be stronger among men than women (Taylor et. al., 2000). This makes intuitive sense considering that men were often considered the protector within family units. While men seem to have a heightened fight or flight response, women seem to be more oriented toward one that *tends and befriends*. Women are not only biologically designed to bring babies into the world, but subsequent roles of feeding and nurturing have historically been women's responsibility, as well. These gender differences play a powerful role within micro-communities and within our society at-large. In addition to these differences in gender, culture also plays a role in the way someone views their community, as well as the way they are socialized to connect (Seppala et al., 2013, Sonn et al., 1999). Every culture holds varying norms around intimacy and vulnerability; this plays out in an obvious way within micro-level communities. For the survival and sustainability of micro-level communities, it is important dyads and families share a common set of expectations and behavioral norms. These communal norms play a powerful role in the amount of openness and vulnerability allowed within these more intimate community relationships.

One of the cultural values at play within dyad and family communities, is a sense of competition. Competition is a result of individuals' perceptions of limited or valued resources and is rooted in a process of comparison between self and others (Sulloway, 2010, Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). Ideas of scarcity and comparison are detrimental to the necessary AHC ingredients of openness, care, and appreciation of the other, and often they narrow one's mind to be more me-centric. Within families, this sense of competition is evident in sibling rivalries (Sulloway, 2010). Social comparison can play a significant role in individuals' well-being,

especially those who are already unhappy (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). These individualistic and competitive mentalities serve as divisive inhibitors of authentic human connection, as well as create a negative feedback loop and downward spiral of negative emotions.

Meso-level Communities: Organization, Faith and Interest Groups

Outside of family communities, individuals belong to many meso-level communities ranging from one's academic community or school, workplace, faith group, or interest groups. Each of these communities provide us with meaningful roles, relationships, and social identities (Sonn et al., 1999). This level of community is especially important as it is a domain in which we tend to have the greatest number of choices. A greater amount of personal agency would logically translate to a greater sense of personal individual investment, which ultimately leads to a higher potential reward of community membership (Obst & White, 2007). Meso-level communities are highly active with frequent communication and interaction of members. This level of activity presents immense opportunity for meaning and high-quality connections: consider workplace communities which might foster a sense of purpose, or a LGBTQ support group which upholds and strengthens one's sense of identity (Frost & Meyer, 2012).

Individuals' happiness is directly correlated with the happiness of the people they are connected. Like other affective states, happiness possesses a factor of *emotional contagion* and spreads between individuals and within groups (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). As social beings, humans are undeniably influenced by society at large and the many groups within it (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Imagine the potential of AHC within this level of community to foster a ripple effect of positive connection throughout our lives: strengthening our sense of community and enhancing our sense of meaning (Smith, 2017).

The meso-level of community provides many opportunities for individuals to *lose themselves* and become part of an emergent social organism: consider playing a team sport, singing in a choir, or marching and chanting at a protest rally (Haidt, Seder, & Kesebir, 2008). It is no surprise that feeling part of something larger than oneself produces great satisfaction. Some propose it is this focus off the self, on to the group, that elicits true joy. Movement is often central to these experiences and perhaps the intense passion and exuberance found through peak experiences is imperative for the long-term maintenance and survival of a cohesive group (Haidt et al., 2008).

Facilitating factors for authentic human Connection: Meso-level. Meso-level communities of workplaces, faith groups, and special interest groups present unique opportunities to facilitate AHC. In this section I will focus on three critical factors for AHC: psychological safety, play, and psychological capital. Psychological safety is characterized by an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk (Edmondson, 1999). This quality is what empowers individuals to be fully engaged, authentically themselves, and invested in the process of the group. Communities that foster psychological safety provide their members with both aspects of mattering: individuals feel they are valued and are invited to add value; without fear of embarrassment or rejection. In addition to a psychological benefit, communities strong in psychological safety are also strong in their performance. Google's Project Aristotle, a research project exploring the qualities that most contribute to an effective team, found psychological safety to be the number one defining element of team effectiveness (reWork, 2019).

Play is a second factor for cultivating AHC within meso-level communities that is especially powerful within a culture of psychological safety. Play is difficult to define but encompasses many qualities: it is an absorbing and intrinsically motivated activity, apparently purposeless, that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness (Brown, 2009). Play can be both an activity in itself, as well as an approach toward other activities. Throughout our lives, play serves as an important mechanism for connection with others. On the playground, unstructured play teaches us how to interact and socialize with others as children, and through young adulthood play transitions to more structured games teaching us how to collaborate and work with others. As we mature, play strengthens social and collaborative skills essential for our survival. Play continues to possess a powerful resource in adulthood, and especially within organizations committed to innovation, creativity, and productivity (West, Hoff, and Carlsson, 2016). Play brings people together and induces positive emotions: two critical criteria for authentically connecting with others.

The final facilitating factor for AHC within meso-level communities is the idea of psychological capital (PsyCap). PsyCap is a concept that originated from the study of positive organizational behavior and is characterized by four criteria: confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans, Luthans & Luthans, 2004). These criteria evolve the concept of organizational capital from *what you have*, to *who you are*. When organizations recognize and value the worth of their people, they capture the inherent potential that exist within humans such as qualities of self-efficacy, self-determination, self-sufficiency, optimism, and perseverance. PsyCap creates a power recipe of ingredients necessary for AHC within meso-level communities.

Inhibiting factors for authentic human connection: Meso-level. Power structures, implicit bias, and instability each serve as inhibiting factors for authentic human connection within meso-level communities such as workplaces, schools, hospitals, and faith-based organizations. The first of these criteria, power structures, references an individuals' perception of personal power, as well as their actual control within the community. Individuals must have both voice and choice: the opportunity to express their preferences and the ability to make choices for themselves (Prilleltensky, 2016). When these preferences are expressed, it is necessary for individuals' needs to be met and their personal investment to be matched by the leadership or other members (Walster et al., 1973). Power structures play a critical role within every meso-level community: consider the relationships between executive teams and employees, students, teachers, and administration, and patients, nurses, and doctors. Individuals' perception of fairness and a balance of power is critical for AHC at all three levels of community.

The second inhibiting factor within meso-level communities is implicit bias. Implicit bias is an umbrella term for discriminatory biases that are based on implicit or unconscious attitudes or stereotypes (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). These biases are unconscious, involuntary, and often automatic responses to stimuli. Individual characteristics such as race, age, gender, weight, sexual orientation, height, and other socio-economic factors can trigger implicit biases and cause discriminatory behaviors in the classroom, courtroom, and even the doctor's office. When interacting with other members of our meso-level communities, these implicit biases can unconsciously affect our behavior and prohibit the sort of open mindedness and appreciation necessary for authentic human connection.

The final inhibiting factor for AHC that I will discuss within meso-level communities is a sense of instability or volatility. Ultimately, meso-level community instability affects individuals' sense of control (Hui & Lee, 2000), as well as a community's sense of equilibrium more broadly. When this occurs, community members experience a decrease in psychological and physical safety, which triggers individuals' fight or flight or competitive mentality. Changes within the community culture that incite members' sense of instability, are a threat to individuals' membership in the community, as well as the community itself (Hui & Lee, 2000). Without proper trust and supportive resources in play, meso-level community instability leads to a *me* mentality and ultimately a sense of disconnection from others. Individual levels of status and disparities in access to information within workplaces, schools, and spiritual communities create additional barriers to AHC. It is important to recognize that cultural identities and historical realities present additional variables for AHC: once trust is broken, it can be difficult to re-establish.

Macro-level Communities: Neighborhoods, Cities, and Governments

Communities are formed by their human members, as well as the constructed structures and systems within and around them (Sonn et al., 1999). The final level of community, the macro-level, contains the greatest amount of structures and systems which form the context within which we live our lives. In the United States, these are the neighborhoods where we live and the city, state, and national contexts that influence our policies and broader social consciousness. These macro-community structures provide obligations, constraints, and integration that is necessary to provide structure and meaning to life (Durkheim, 1951). Ironically, macro-level communities within modern societies experience higher rates of

individualism, isolation, depression, anxiety, and suicide than macro-communities in less modern societies (Haidt et al., 2008).

Fostering AHC and cultivating one's sense of community within macro-level communities presents immense opportunities for social support that is essential in the face of personal challenge or stress (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). It is possible AHC and sense of community add to our personal well-being in part because they shift our focus off ourselves, to those around us. Most find giving support to be more meaningful than receiving support (Haidt, 2006) and positive cooperation and prosocial behavior are instrumental ingredients for fostering AHC within macro-level communities.

Facilitating factors for authentic human connection: Macro-level. Though there are many factors that facilitate authentic human connection within macro-level communities, I will focus on social capital, ritual, and sense of place as necessary conditions for AHC. One downfall of traditional psychology and public health more broadly is the tendency to focus predominantly on the individual (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). The facilitating factor of social capital is most important within the macro-level as it attempts to capture the collective essence of community. Social capital is a critical player that lies outside the individual and between individuals and subgroups within communities (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000). It is a byproduct of high social cohesion, or the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups within society. Social capital builds on the foundational Aristotelian idea that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” and it represents the seemingly intangible, but critical, elements of interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, and mutual aid within communities (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000).

Researchers have identified three key types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking (Sztreter & Woolcock, 2004). Bonding social capital occurs between people who see themselves as having similar social identities and bridging social capital occurs between people who see themselves differently in terms of their social identity. Linking social capital is a subtype of bridging social capital that takes place across formal power structures. Each of these forms of social capital play an important role in creating community connection on the macro-scale. Bridging and linking social capital are incredibly important in creating communities of fairness and inclusion (Sztreter & Woolcock, 2004). All three types of social capital are essential for holistic individual and community well-being (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000) and critical considerations for building communities that embody the necessary ingredients for authentic human connection.

The next facilitating factor for AHC within macro-level communities is ritual. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) was one of the first scholars to take seriously the power and process of rituals. In his work he advanced the idea of *communitas* as a powerful byproduct of ritual. *Communitas* is defined as the inspiration and revitalization realized through ritual experiences (Olaveson, 2001). This phenomenon generates a state of equality, comradeship and common humanity, outside of normal social distinctions, roles and hierarchies. Turner believed rituals were the basis of all societies and the place where society's values, norms, and deep knowledge of itself was reaffirmed and even created (Turner, 1969).

In addition to the way rituals unify community members' shared norms and values more broadly, rituals also serve as a conduit for interpersonal relationships and connection. In fact, social connection is recognized as one of the three primary regulatory functions of rituals, along

with individuals' emotions and performance states (Hobson, Schroeder, Risen, Xygalatas & Inzlicht, 2018). Consider the ritual of singing the national anthem before a sporting event, gathering with your neighborhood for the annual 4th of July picnic, celebrating Thanksgiving with family and friends, or the many social, cultural, and religious rituals we practice throughout our lives. Though some of these rituals may be performed within a micro-level community, they impact macro-level communities on a grand scale. These communal rituals reinforce a shared identity and one's sense of connection to the greater society.

The final facilitating factor within macro level communities is a commonly understood sense of place. Sense of place refers to a psychological construct that involves attributing a geographical location with meaning, values, and sense of connection (Rogers & Bragg, 2012). A review of measurement and application of sense of place highlights the importance of history, attachment, and identity as facilitating factors for formalizing one's sense of community and authentic connection to others (Chavis & Pretty, 1999). Not surprisingly, one's sense of place is correlated with their sense of community. Neighborhoods high in these elements possess five essential factors: informal interaction (i.e., with neighbors), safety (i.e., having a good place to live), pro-urbanism (i.e., privacy and anonymity), neighboring preferences (i.e., preference for frequent neighbor interaction), and localism (i.e., options and desire to participate in neighborhood affairs; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Together, social capital, ritual, and sense of place establish a strong foundation for authentic human connection and are essential elements for community flourishing.

Inhibiting factors for authentic human connection: Macro-level. Multiple factors intersect to disrupt the potential for authentic human connection at the macro-level including systemic histories of oppression, racism, homophobia, sexism, governmental corruption and unrest. Macro-level communities have the difficult task of managing the interests of multiple stakeholders and creating policies that allow individuals and divergent interest groups to feel empowered and unified around common goals. In this section I will focus on just three of these inhibiting factors for AHC: inequality, mistrust, and physical environment.

The first inhibiting factor within macro-level communities is inequality. In the United States, income and wealth inequality, the disparity that exists between the rich and the poor, has been rising sharply since the 1970s (Stone, Trisi, Sherman, & Debot, 2015). The best survey data demonstrate that the share of wealth held by the top one percent rose from just under 30% in 1989 to nearly 39% in 2016, while the bottom 90% fell from just over 33% to less than 23% within the same time period (Stone et al., 2015). Many assessments have demonstrated that as income inequality increases within a society, investment in social capital and social trust plummets (Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner, & Prothrow-Stith, 1997).

In addition to crippling the necessary foundation for AHC, inequality has even been associated with life itself: increased income inequality is associated with increased rates of mortality (Ross et al., 2000). Social and mainstream media has perpetuated individuals' experience of inequality by disseminating allusions of wealth and privilege as the norm within the United States and around the world. This can lead to social comparison, individualism and competition: all antagonistic factors to the extra-individual phenomenon of communities and disable individuals' regard for the other (Sonn et al., 1999). Individuals' regard and commitment

to one another, is at the heart of psychological sense of community. It is this element that allows for a oneness perspective, mobilizing all members to collaborate for the greater good (Chavis & Pretty, 1999).

A second inhibiting factor which can threaten the potential for authentic human connection is mistrust. Mistrust at this level of community can be born out of generational experiences of poverty, oppression, exclusion, and injustice. With a oneness perspective, when formal structures of power overlook, ignore, or mistreat certain groups of individuals, this tarnishes the ability for any individual to truly feel a sense of mattering or recognize the potential authentic human connection. Transparency, accountability, and open communication are critical elements necessary to build trust at this level of community, and law enforcement and elected officials especially must honor this responsibility to community members (Brown & Baker, 2019). Community levels of trust is correlated with members' sense of empowerment: in order for individuals to feel empowered and safe to contribute their strengths, skills, and resources, they must have assurance that their contributions will be valued, appreciated, and respected.

In addition to these economical, historical, psychological, social, and emotional factors that can inhibit AHC within the macro-level, the final factor that plays an important role in fostering authentic human connection the physical environment and design of macro-communities. Extensive studies have shown that green space is positively correlated with individuals' sense of community, health, and well-being (Maas, Van Dillen, Verheij & Groenewegen, 2009). Therefore, communities with lower access to green or community spaces, increased rates of violence, or consistent threats to physical safety, diminish the potential for AHC among community members. Trees and green spaces, especially in urban environments,

allow members to both meet and connect with others, as well as cultivate a deeper connection to the environment (Rogers & Bragg, 2012). When neighborhoods and cities are devoid of these environmental points of connection, residents lose out on the opportunity to feel a deeper sense of connection with the place they live and the people around them.

Intentional Strategies to Cultivate AHC

The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.

—Coretta Scott King, *This Will Be Remembered of Her: Stories of Women Reshaping the World*

In this final section of my paper, I propose three strategies which translate the theoretical and empirical findings identified earlier, into applied tools to cultivate authentic human connection within each level of community. These strategies begin with those we may exercise independently, to those we practice with others, and within groups: 1) Cultivate Compassion, 2) Give Presence, and 3) Recognize Strengths.

Cultivate Compassion

The first of these strategies is to cultivate compassion within ourselves and for others in our lives. Authentic human connection is deeply rooted in the recognition of humans' deep interdependence and connection with each other, and the environments they live. Building compassion, an other-oriented emotion, strengthens the brain's "empathy network." These regions of the brain are responsible for pain and the perception of others' pain, as well as nurturing behaviors (Seppala et al., 2013). In order to give compassion to others generously, we must give compassion to ourselves. Two tools that can assist with cultivating compassion within ourselves and the people around us are the practices of self-compassion and loving kindness

meditation. In a world where comparison is so easy, self-compassion is a practice that empowers us to be kind and understanding toward oneself in difficult times rather than self-critical (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion fosters our sense of connectedness by allowing us to perceive our experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than separate and isolated. Finally, self-compassion allows us to mindfully hold painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them.

In addition to cultivating compassion within ourselves, we must also foster compassion for others. Loving kindness meditation (LKM), a practice that has long been practiced within Buddhist traditions, is one that directs compassion and wishes for well-being toward real and imagined others (Hutcherson, Seppala & Gross, 2008). Studies suggest that even a few minutes of LKM increases feelings of social connection and positivity toward others. LKM and mindfulness meditation more broadly, possess the potential to directly counteract some of the inhibiting factors presented across levels. For example, the practice of mindfulness meditation has been shown to have an inverse relationship with implicit race and age bias (Lueke & Gibson, 2015). The great irony is that our ability to reap the benefits of authentically connecting with others, is dependent on our ability to authentically connect with ourselves. It is through this self-acceptance that we are able to show up unconditionally for others.

Give Presence

The second tool to cultivate AHC within community is dependent not on how we show up, but that we show up, and in person. This strategy cultivates what Edward Hallowell (1998) calls *the human moment*. In the 21st century with remote working options, video calls, and social media, in-person moments and interactions seem to be the exception, rather than the rule. In the

workplace, consider the number of times you have felt unnecessary stress or confusion about the tone or meaning of digital communication or when in the company of friends or colleagues you looked around to notice that everyone was preoccupied on their screen or smartphone. According to Hallowell (1998), a true human moment is equally dependent on both people's physical presence, as well as their intellectual and emotional attention.

As a social species deeply dependent on others for our well-being and survival, the decline in authentic human moments is a threat to life itself. In-person interactions serve multiple social, emotional, spiritual, and biological ends: everything from fortifying our immune systems, regulating our emotions, and increasing our chances of survival in the case of a natural disaster (Pinker, 2015). In Susan Pinker's (2015) book, *The Village Effect*, she recommends we strategically architect our lives to have these built in social interactions: join an intramural team, plan a lunch date, and talk with your neighbors. In fact, these social interactions can even take place between strangers: commuters on the train, cashiers at the grocery store, or seatmates on an airplane. One study found that when passengers engaged in conversation with fellow commuters on trains and buses, they had a more positive experience than when they chose not to (Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Even more compelling, the reward of connecting with others is mutually beneficial and those who were talked *to*, had equally positive experiences as those who instigated the conversation. By intentionally nurturing our social selves and reaching out to others, we take care of our whole self and may more authentically reap the benefits of connection across all levels of community.

There is one place that we have been showing up since our early ancestors transitioned from the hunter gatherer lifestyle, to agricultural societies: the proverbial kitchen table (Pinker,

2015). As early community populations became more dense, communal meals provided a space for people to come together, share food, and feel a sense of belonging. In addition to the nutritional sustenance provided during mealtimes, communal meals provide an avenue for all levels of community to carry on traditions, celebrate cultural identities, and build social connections. Mealtimes present an opportunity for ritual, meaning-making, and routines that serve important functions for all humans, these effects have been especially studied and explored among children and adolescents (Absolom & Roberts, 2011). In today's world of convenience food and occupational demands, eating with others provides an avenue for us to intentionally carve out time to foster AHC within our communities (Sobal & Nelson, 2003).

Recognize strengths

The third and final strategy for fostering AHC within community is the cultivation of a strengths-based perspective and the intentional practice of active-constructive response. The first half of this strategy, the cultivation of a strengths-based perspective, relies on the efforts of Dr. Chris Peterson and Dr. Martin Seligman (2004). In the early 2000s, they conducted a thorough cross-cultural analysis culminating in a scientific classification of 24-character strengths and virtues: the best qualities of humanity. Peterson and Seligman grounded their efforts with six core virtues identified by philosophers and religious leaders: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Within each of these virtues, are twenty-four character strengths. For example, under the virtue of wisdom are strengths of creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, and perspective (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Character strengths and virtues are individuals' way of being and acting in the world. They are most powerful when we are aware of them, explore them, and apply them within our

lives (Niemiec, 2018). A strength-based perspective provides us with the awareness of qualities necessary to develop authentic human connection with others: love, kindness, social intelligence, humor, gratitude, fairness, and forgiveness. This perspective also allows us to see strengths in others. Strengths-spotting, recognizing and naming the strengths of others, allows individuals to feel seen and appreciated for their truest selves (Niemiec, 2018). This practice empowers us to elevate our relationships to a deeper sense of connection.

The second half of this strategy is a style of communication called active-constructive responding. To illustrate, I provide an example. Imagine your friend shares good news with you: they just got a new job! The way you respond to others' good news, and the way they respond to ours, carries the ability to compound its good effect, amplify positive emotions, and build trust within a relationship. Research suggests there are four common response styles: passive-constructive, passive-destructive, active-destructive, and active-constructive (Gable, Gonzaga & Strachman, 2006). While a passive-constructive response might acknowledge good news with a simple "That is nice," a passive destructive response would ignore the event and change topics, such as "That reminds me of something I wanted to tell you!" active-destructive responses would focus on the negative "Wow, that sounds intense. I don't envy you!" while active-constructive response is a signal of authentic support: "Wow, that is great news! How are you feeling?" Capitalizing on good news leads to increases in positive affect, greater life satisfaction, and an enhanced sense of belonging (Gable et al., 2006).

Active-constructive responding requires we are authentically present to the people around us. It is fueled by many character strengths, including kindness, curiosity, and love. Over time these positive interactions build networks of strong and supportive community. In fact, in

romantic relationships, one study showed that the way couples engage in conversations around positive events tends to be even more predictive of long-term success than negative event conversations (Gable et al., 2006). While it is certainly important to feel social support when things go wrong, these findings suggest that it is also incredibly important to have social support when things go right. Savoring positive emotions, both in the moment and in the re-telling of their experience, allows them to broaden and build upon each other, enabling an *upward spiral* of positive affect and a deeper repository of resilience for future use (Fredrickson, 2013).

Each of the strategies to foster AHC within communities: cultivating compassion, giving presence, and recognizing strengths, serve as powerful resources in our effort to build lives of meaning and connection. Relationships with others are of paramount importance in an individual's pursuit of happiness and well-being. By looking outside ourselves, recognizing and appreciating the strengths of others, and showing up for others in an authentic way we can transform our relationships. In turn, our connection to others and sense of community serve us as powerful protective factors when we face the inevitable challenges of our lives.

Limitations & future directions

Each level of community presents unique facilitating and inhibiting factors for authentic human connection. In this analysis I have merely skimmed the surface identifying three facilitating and inhibiting factors within each level, though there are undoubtedly countless other factors and sub-factors that play important roles in facilitating AHC within all levels of community. There are common threads of trust, safety, and openness among all three levels, although each level of community also presents unique challenges and criteria for AHC: consider psychological safety for organizations or environmental design for neighborhoods. In addition to

the sheer number of factors that are related to authentic human connection, the theoretical and ambiguous nature of important concepts such as psychological sense of community, social capital, and sense of place pose additional challenges for objective measurement (Perkins & Long, 2002). Though difficult and complex, the reward of AHC within communities is a worthy pursuit. Going forward, I plan to translate the findings of this paper to programmatic experiences that empower individuals, organizations, and communities to foster authentic human connection at every level in their lives.

Conclusion

If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

—African proverb

At a time when our world is more interconnected than ever before, authentic human connection seems an exceedingly rare experience in the modern world, despite the fact connection to others and community belonging are essential for our individual sense of meaning and holistic well-being. In this paper, I have created a bridge between positive psychology and community psychology. I presented a recipe for AHC, as well as a 3x3x3 conceptual model investigating three levels of community: micro-communities of dyads and families, meso-communities of workplaces and schools, and macro-communities of neighborhoods, cities, and countries. For each level of community, I identified three facilitating and inhibiting factors for authentic human connection, including: eye contact, listening, virtue, psychological safety, psychological capital, play, social capital, ritual, and sense of place, as well as unconscious bias, fear, social and cultural norms, power structures, competition, instability, inequality, mistrust, and physical environment.

Drawing on the rich resource of positive psychology, I closed my paper by presenting three strategies for individuals to foster authentic human connection across all levels of community: cultivate compassion, give presence, and recognize strengths. Though there are many nuances within each level of community, this conceptual model provides the foundation for us to intentionally cultivate connection in our lives. At its core, authentic human connection is the recognition of our inherent interdependence and interconnection: we are one shared humanity. In the spirit of Ubuntu, I hope you will join me on this journey to transform our communities to be sources of love and connection.

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