

THESIS

COMING TO TERMS WITH STAYING, GOING, AND RETURNING: A RURAL
COMMUNITY ETHNOGRAPHY

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

COMING TO TERMS WITH STAYING, GOING, AND RETURNING: A RURAL COMMUNITY ETHNOGRAPHY

This thesis studies how people in a rural small town within the larger United States come to understand and talk about the dynamic processes of young people “staying” in, “going” from, and “returning” to their hometown. The exigency for this thesis is twofold. First, people from small towns must at some point face the question of whether to remain in or to leave their hometown. For the younger generation this question is typically answered during the transition into adulthood (i.e., high school graduation and one’s 18th birthday), but often will be addressed many more times in their lifetime. While “staying,” “going,” and “returning” may be understood as a normative process, these actions have profound and distinct impacts on the future of the U.S. American rural small town. Second, the small town in middle America provides a unique and academically underappreciated location for inquiry. Understanding how both young people and other members of a community make sense of “staying” and “going” provides insights into rural community life. Grounded in the Ethnography of Communication this study takes up three broad research questions for analysis:

RQ 1: How do people in a rural community make sense of young people’s (i.e., 18-30 years of age) practices of staying, leaving, and returning to their hometown?

RQ 2: What are the localized taxonomy of terms (Hymes, 1974) used by participants to describe the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning?”

RQ 3: What do participant discourses reveal about “coming to terms with cultures” (Philipsen, 2008)—the negotiation of two or more cultural codes in one’s life?

Using ethnographic interview procedures, supplemented by participant observation of the community, the narratives of 11 interlocutors—six young people and five older community members—are engaged in responses to research questions. Young people narrate the pinnacle moment of high school graduation as a catalyst opportunity to leave the community. Throughout interviews both young people and community members describe the importance of young people coming back to visit during the years that they are away at college and beyond. Moreover, not all young people intend to leave the community and never return. Those who do return, both to visit and to live, are situated as forever members of the community by older generations who take vested interests in the lives of young people. Three unique, interconnected taxonomies develop in participants' narratives regarding considerations: "you come back," "it's (like) family," and "everybody knows everybody." Interlocutors' negotiations of "everybody knows everybody" in contrast to "everybody knows your business" reveal tensions between autonomy and collectivity as interlocutors personally and communally engage in "coming to terms with 'staying,' 'going,' and 'returning.'" Ultimately, collective orientations towards family are privileged in motivating "staying" and "returning" practices.

An underlying tension arose in narratives; how can the cultural code of collectivity, or code of "staying," be maintained when an individualistic narrative, or code of "leaving," is appropriated? While the default trajectory of "schooling" and jobs elsewhere explains why some young people leave indefinitely, young people's narratives are supplanted by their overarching commitments to stay and contribute to the community. Instead of focusing on the liminal experience, interlocutors elect to focus on their small town identities, creating a code of recognition that acknowledges the requisite need for education beyond high school. The requisite post-high school education means young people must leave and perhaps will

subsequently relocate. That said, the code of recognition is firmly grounded in the collectivistic role of family and community in one's life. Ultimately, the code of recognition acknowledges the presence of individualistic and collectivistic ways of speaking and being. This thesis then explores "coming to terms with cultures" (Philipsen 2008) through the codes of "staying," "going," and "returning," making contributions to the study of U.S. American speech communities first called for by Philipsen in 1975.

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Much of my thesis project hinges upon the code of recognition, a cultural way of speaking that acknowledges individual autonomy while simultaneously recognizing collectivistic care and commitment to community. While the final bound thesis represents the culmination of individual efforts, the thesis document would not exist without the collective insight and support garnered from one's communities of practice. To put the code of recognition in practice I must then offer due acknowledgement and gratitude to the many individuals and communities that have guided my endeavors and shaped my scholarly voice throughout the thesis journey.

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—L.L.R.
May 4, 2012

*These names have been changed to protect potential identification with the community.

DEDICATION

To all the individuals who were born in, grew-up in and near, grew-up visiting, moved to, stayed in, left, returned to, still come back to, rest eternally, and forever call a rural farming community somewhere in our diverse landscape their home. May your narratives of faith and family live on into the future.

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Chapter One

Introduction

*“Raise a little hell, laugh ‘til it hurts/ Put an extra five in the plate at church.
Call up my folks just to chat/ It’s time to make time for that. . . .
Catch up on all the things I’ve always missed.
Just start livin,’ that’s the next thing on my list.”*
— “My List,” (Keith, 2001, track 11).

On Thursday, May 20, 2002, seventeen youth, all of whom had lived their entire lives thus far in neighboring rural communities to each other, participated in their 8th grade graduation ceremony surrounded by loving family and community friends. Excitement and accomplishment was tangible on the smiling faces of fourteen year olds who had been in school together since age five as they posed for pictures in their best dresses and new ties. The banner hanging next to where they would come forward to receive their diplomas read, “Start Living, That’s the Next Thing on Our List.” The class motto had been chosen from the chorus of a then popular song and revealed anticipation that high school would finally allow them to “start living.” Ten years later the meaning of the epitaph words are ever more poignant if one considers how these 17 classmates and their young adult contemporaries have come to define and discuss what it means to “start living” after having grown-up in a small town cultural space.

This thesis studies how people in a rural small town¹ within the larger United States come to understand and talk about the dynamic processes of young people “staying” in, “going” from, and “returning” to their hometown. “Staying” and “going” refers to the transitive act of remaining or leaving as engaged in, particularly, but not exclusively, by the community’s young people, individuals ages 18-30, who have presently graduated from high school and/or are negotiating transitions in their early adulthood. These acts represent a fluid process of moving in

and out of the community and serve as constant moments of transition that affect the community at large. This transitive moment signals a larger process of movement that occurs over time.

Through observation and interview this study interprets how interlocutors² talk about and derive meaning from the transitive process of “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” These terms are researcher-designated terms based on the work of Carr and Kefalas (2006/2009) who develop distinct yet interconnected trajectories for rural youth based on whether youth remain in, leave, or return to their hometowns. Their taxonomy and labels extend the work of Jamieson (2000); Stockdale (2002); and Ford, Quilgars, Burrows, and Please (1997). The proposed project approaches the topic from the field of communication studies. Drawing on ethnographic field studies as a method for community focused inquiry this projects asks how the processes of “staying,” “leaving,” and “returning” impacts cultural codes of being and living in one U.S. American rural small town.³

This chapter provides the foundation for my thesis project. First, I characterize the exigency for studying rural communities and the rationale for studying the ways participants make sense of “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” Within this section I provide the research questions that guide my proposed study. Second, I review literature pertaining to theoretical constructs and previous studies that inform my research questions. I begin with a discussion of rural youth migration scholarship. I then ground inquiry in the ethnographic, community-centered approach to research supplemented by discussing liminality as a theoretical construct useful for making sense of the phenomenon. Third, I propose and outline upcoming chapters.

Exigency and Research Questions

The exigency for this thesis lies in the need to study the phenomena of rootedness and migration, or “staying” and “going,” in an agrarian U.S. American small town. The rationale is

twofold. First, people from small towns must at some point face the question of whether to remain in or leave their hometown. For the younger generation this question is typically answered during the transition into adulthood (i.e., high school graduation and one's 18th birthday), but will often be addressed many more times in their lifetime. While "staying," "going," and "returning" may be understood as a normative process, these actions have profound and distinct impacts on the U.S. American rural small town. The future of the community often depends on those who remain. Second, the small town in middle America provides a unique and academically underappreciated location for inquiry. Understanding how both young people and other members of a community make sense of "staying" and "going" provides insights into rural community life. Communication studies is uniquely situated to further explore rural community life, a cultural space not yet widely included in disciplinary research.

As rationale for the thesis project I introduce the phenomenon of what I presently term "staying," "going," and "returning" and its potential impact on the future of an U.S. American rural small town. I then establish a need for communication studies research that focuses on the rural community, advocating for *emic* (i.e., culture specific) ethnographic research. I have strategically chosen to focus on young people. First, by focusing conversations on young adult moments of transitions (in and away from their hometown) research speaks to more specific aspects of "staying," "going," and "returning" as they occur during the cultural transition into adulthood. While all members of a rural community face questions about their own "staying," "going," and/or "returning" throughout their lives, focusing on young adults engages a transitional milestone acknowledged and negotiated by the larger community. This is to say everyone in the community is impacted by patterns of "staying," "going," and "returning." Pragmatically, the shift away from more general inquiry about "staying," "going," and

“returning” in U.S. rural communities provides a more manageable scope for a thesis project given an already nuanced phenomenon. Finally, youth migration research represents a specific body of literature to which this study can contribute and introduce a communication studies perspective.

Principally, decisions about whether to stay in, leave, or return to a given community could be considered fundamental junctures in one’s life and not necessarily unique to particular people and places. The culmination of one’s compulsory education and subsequent passage into adulthood is met with questions about remaining in one place or going to another regardless of where one grew up. However, “staying” and “going” can have far greater consequences for certain communities. For the American small town, high school graduation marks a considerable out-migration of many of its youth. In their study of one rural Midwestern community Carr and Kefalas (2009) argue that the decision⁴ to stay or leave is the principal question anyone who grows up in a small town must face at some point in his or her life. The departure of rural youth from their small communities is not a new phenomenon; there have always been people who have left in favor of expanding opportunities for education (e.g., obtaining a college degree) and jobs combined with opportunities for heightened cultural experiences that make the more urban locale appealing. Today this cumulative exodus over time provides an explanation for the continual decreasing population in rural America that is threatening the sustainability of these locales (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Longworth, 2008; Hobbs, Stoops, *et.al*, 2002; Davidson, 1996; Craycroft & Frazio, 1983). The impact of this population loss pattern is felt as the future of the small town is called into question. However, the small town remains home for many people. Not everyone goes; some never leave while others leave and return later and/or consistently go

and stay for a variety of reasons and periods of time throughout their lives. For those who do leave the question of returning often lingers in many of their minds (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

How people understand their belonging to the community, whether they stay, leave, or return is demonstrated in how they communicate, particularly about identity and group membership. This research is interested in how the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” is communicatively constructed, negotiated, and performed. Guided by Carr and Kefalas’ assertion that the decision to stay, leave, or return is tantamount for those who come from a rural community this study seeks to understand how people reconcile this transitive process in their own lives as well as how it impacts the rural small town. In other words, how do discourses and interactions occur surrounding the topics of remaining, leaving, and/or returning in the town? A small agrarian community located in America’s heartland offers a locale for ethnographic engagement of this question.

Previous sociological and anthropological community studies have sought to characterize small town residents and their way of life, specifically in relation and contrast to mass society (Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Vidich & Bensman, 1958/2000; West, 1964; Varenne, 1977). Studies such as these respond to the idealized American myth of the rural community as a quaint and isolated space that remains relatively unchanged from its past to present. To the outsider the rural community can represent a nostalgic place, a quintessential small town with a slower pace of life. To others the myth includes stagnated beliefs, traditionalism, and the rejection of progress, a more critical interpretation of the bucolic life (Varenne, 1977). However, such a myth does not singularly characterize small towns. Varenne (1977), in his book *Americans Together*, argues that one cannot consider small towns “simple societies, one-dimensional cultures of conformity removed from the complexities of mass urban society” (p. 2). Small towns demonstrate unique

characteristics and yet are deeply impacted by external forces. The leverage of industrialization and globalization as external forces should not mitigate the study of the community's response. While collective history, memory, and shared values appear to be of great importance to the rural town, life in these places requires dynamic negotiations of present identity and change. Complexities such as the consolidation of schools with neighboring towns or the closure of the church due to declining population not only threaten aspects of the town's shared identity, but demonstrate necessary adjustments to the out-migration of young people. Appreciating how the small town maintains its identity despite population loss requires acknowledging the community's ability to adapt to change. As the existence and sustainability of American small towns is impacted by numerous external forces the need for understanding the unique cultural complexities of these spaces from within becomes imperative.

American small towns are at a crossroads and the future of its inhabitants and spaces depend on collective reactions giving urgency to rural community research. Longworth (2008) argues that presently the U.S. Midwest region is undergoing a critical transformation, one that threatens the deeply held sense of stability the region has been associated with for generations. The agrarian community is literally disappearing from the landscape because fewer and fewer people reside in these small towns (Craycroft & Frazio, 1983; Davidson, 1996; Carr & Kefalas, 2009). According to the 2000 U.S. Census 80.3 percent of the population lived in a metropolitan area and that number is expected to continue to rise (Hobbs, Stoops, *et.al*, 2002). Ultimately, the disappearance of the rural population signals disconnection from these spaces. Small towns are found between metropolitan swells along well-traveled interstate byways, yet often go unnoticed. The survival and vitality of small towns is threatened as the population shifts and declines and change alters the ability to understand the agrarian way of life (Longworth, 2008; Maharidge &

Williamson, 2008; Bloom, 2001). Quite simply, communities not only disappear when people leave, but, moreover, when people become detached from a culture and way of life.

Communities are forgotten when they are no longer points of identification.

The implications of decline extend beyond the rural community. Carr and Kefalas (2009) argue that “the devastating loss of educated and talented young people, the aging of the population, and the erosion of the local economy—has [*sic.*] repercussions far beyond their [small town] boundaries” (pp. ix-x). The impact of disappearing and diminishing small towns is felt by a nation that relies on these towns for food, natural resources, and manufacturing. Implications are also felt when the small towns’ unique cultural contributions are disregarded. Concerned with the future of the Midwest as a region, Longworth (2008) writes about the economic and social impacts of “dying farm villages and crumbling old factory towns” and the “people left behind” (p. 4). Focusing on what has been forgotten and lost often comes from the outsider’s assessment of value and their ability to be persuaded of the community’s importance. Without cooperative awareness among urban, suburban, and rural residents a more replete understanding of the impact of Midwestern regional decline fails to be enacted. These prohibitive perspectives actively separate those who reside in rural communities from the rest of the population. Rural America’s future is threatened without cooperation.

But the rural community is not lost yet; albeit declining significantly in representation, rural communities continue to exist and seek to prosper. These communities continue to adapt to change. In fact, I believe that the rural community and its inhabitants cannot be approached solely as objects reacting to change, but rather have to be viewed simultaneously as active participants in ensuring that their communities thrive into the future, even when the odds are stacked against them. In initial summer 2011 observations⁵ I note several instances of the

community of study mobilizing its resources for the sake of collective progress and community service. For example, I participated in the annual church picnic, the primary fundraiser and the town's largest celebratory gathering. In the days preceding the weekend festivities community members built stands, volunteered their time, and gave willingly to support the vitality of the town (see Appendix A: Fieldnote Sample). In another instance, several women organized a bloodmobile complete with homemade baked goods and numerous volunteers to assist donors. From these observations, my initial impression is that people care deeply about their community's future and enact a commitment to volunteerism that is central to community survival. For these reasons I ground the proposed study in one rural community and its ability to remain resolute and adapt to as well as negotiate the migration of its young people.

While individuals of various generations find themselves leaving for a variety of reasons and lengths of time, their departures are not necessarily to the demise of the town. In order for the town to survive it seems that some people have to leave; the community, for example, relies on more fluid physical boundaries when jobs and necessities are not available without traveling outside the town. So then why do people stay? Admittedly, small town residents are known for their rootedness to place (Varenne, 1977; Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Yet the answers as to why people stay are varied and complex, and, arguably, would require thorough and comparative studies of why people leave and return to small towns; such a study proves too vast for a master's thesis. I focus my study, then, on the "staying," "going," and "returning" of young people because the long-term future of the community is impacted by the presence of younger generations. Fundamentally, small towns need young people to survive.

High school graduation and the transition into adulthood mark a major transition in one's life that has a fundamental lasting impact on the community's future. While this transition may

or may not be a decision that one makes freely, it is certainly not a decision made independently. “Young people” as a collective represent a population going through these transitions under more similar constraints. The experience of parents and grandparents, in comparison to their children and grandchildren, has the potential to be different based on generation, history, and opportunity. Older generations are often farther removed from their own migratory transitions and more rooted in the community having stayed or returned longer ago. But the focus of this study is not only on the young people, it is on the community. This study takes a holistic community-centered approach concerned less with solving the perceived problem of youth migrating away from their agrarian hometowns. The overarching purpose of this study seeks to understand how people in one community talk about staying in, leaving, and/or returning to the small town, rural community where they grew up. In other words, the way people communicate about remaining and/or leaving provides thoughtful insight about the community’s place in migration choices. I situate my first research question on how the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” is understood within the rural community:

RQ 1: How do people in a rural community make sense of young people’s (i.e., 18-30 years of age) practices of staying, leaving, and returning to their hometown?

Communication studies provides a unique perspective for studying rural community identity and the phenomenon of remaining and leaving. Specifically, Hymes’s Ethnography of Communication and Philipsen’s Speech Codes theory provide useful perspectives and methodological approaches to this research. Ethnographic inquiry begins with the community’s communicative conduct (Hymes, 1974). The rural community represents a unique speech community, a distinct culture with a distinct speech code. Hymes (1972) defines a speech community as “sharing rules for the conduct and interpretations of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety” (p. 54). His Ethnography of Communication

focuses on studying speech at the community level by concentrating on how meaning is created through cultural interaction and requires the researcher to focus on the communicative act/event (Hymes, 1974). Philipsen augments Hymes's approach to studying the culturally situated practices of communication. Paralleling his definition of culture, Philipsen defines a speech code as "a historically enacted, socially constructed systems of terms, meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct" (Philipsen, 2002, p. 56). Speech codes are unique to a cultural community. Research centered on the rural community offers great potential for understanding how speech functions and is valued in a given community. Philipsen (1975) issues a call for more "descriptive and comparative studies of American speech communities" (p. 22), studies that suggest how speaking is valued in a variety of diverse speech communities. This study responds to this call by advancing the rural community as a distinct site for inquiry, yet also follows recent research trends in the discipline of communication studies.

In 2009 and 2010 two major National Communication Association journals, *Communication Monographs* and *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, published a series of essays responding to questions about the impact and future directions of disciplinary research. These essays collectively contend that future research should focus on descriptive studies of communication at the community level. Milburn (2010) argues that effective research begins with localized description of communication nuances. By focusing on how communication emerges in a given space and time research acknowledges communication as a constitutive social process through which humans construct reality, understand experiences, and rely on communication to reproduce social structures and facilitate interaction. García-Jiménez & Craig (2010) assert that communication is emergent and historically situated within the social and cultural features of a community. Without featuring the work of Hymes and Philipsen the

NCA journals' essay series highlights the value of studying the constitutive capacity of communication within a given speech community. Following Korschman's (2010) assertion that communication research must ultimately seek to explain social phenomena from an inherently communicative mode of understanding ethnographic research responds to a call for studies that appreciate the communicative complexities of social life in a given speech community.

Discovering of constitutive cultural codes in communication is dynamic. A community study offers a unique way to look at speaking *in situ*, of identifying specific speech codes and practices that inherently occur in a community. Studying communication in its place of origin takes an *emic* perspective. *Emic* research "is culture-specific [and concentrates] on the meanings that communicative concepts have for members of specific speech communities" (Wittenborn, 2003, p. 187). While I name the phenomenon with the terms "staying," "going," and "returning" to set up the study, ultimately I attend to the discourses of informants to further name and supply thick descriptions of the phenomenon of interest in subsequent chapters. Following *emic* research practices I am interested in the community's specific terms and ways of speaking about their life experience and negotiation of rootedness and/or migration in small town life, with special attention paid to the experience and practice of its young adults.

Emic research contrasts with *etic* research that focuses on patterns that can be generalized across cultures (Wittenborn, 2003; Hajek & Giles, 2003; Hall, 2002). An *emic* approach allows for interlocutors' knowledge of cultural codes to be accounted for in research and provides a means for studying meaning making processes from the community members' situated experience. Moreover, ethnographic field studies provide a means for discovering speakers' attitudes and social identities as well as speech communities' responses to social changes

(Gumperz, 1972). Such studies contribute to understanding the communicative complexities of social life in context. Therefore, my second research question asks:

RQ 2: What are the localized taxonomy of terms (Hymes, 1974) used by participants to describe the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning?”

Ultimately, an ethnographic study of the ways of speaking provides for what Philipsen has recently termed “coming to terms with cultures” (Philipsen, 2008). By this he refers “to the study of situations in which someone not only tries to learn, but tries to come to terms with, to contend with, as it were, the presence in their life world of two or more cultural codes” (p. 3). The edict “coming to terms with cultures” centers on individuals’ attempt to negotiate culture, to contend with a communal speaking convention, not for the purpose of mastery, but rather for the sake of appreciating how communication constitutes complexity within cultural life. For those community members who negotiate the tension of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” a study of communication offers an opportunity to come to terms with the multiple cultural codes of community membership. Following my first and second research questions, I situate my third research question in the practices of conducting ethnographic research within the field of communication studies and an enduring, contemporary cultural conversation, inquiring:

RQ 3: What do participant discourses reveal about “coming to terms with cultures” (Philipsen, 2008)—the negotiation of two or more cultural codes in one’s life?

The rural community is a potentially valuable place for analyzing the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” that occurs in culturally situated discourses. More specifically, however, one might ask, “Why this particular speech community as the location of research?” Practically, I have access to the rural Midwestern town because I grew up on a farm near it and have had family established in the area for over 100 years. While being known by many in the community will invite many ethical questions addressed more thoroughly in chapter

two, ultimately, I look to this town because of the communication exigencies I have noted above and because of similarity in composition, history, and residents' lifestyle to other rural communities that dot the Midwestern landscape.

Literature Review

The review of literature proceeds with a multi-disciplinary discussion of rural youth migration practices that situate negotiations of remaining and leaving among young adults. The later section of the literature review takes up liminality as a theoretical construct to explicate both the transition from adolescence to adulthood as well as the implications of liminal experiences on cultural identity.

Rural Youth Migration

The decision to stay or leave one's hometown is the single most important moment in the transition to adulthood for youth who grow up in rural locales (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Rural communities often lack the educational, economic, and cultural opportunities available elsewhere. While electing to leave may mean the potential for greater personal advancement, making a life in rural America provides for staying close to family, friends, and the familiarity of community life. For rural youth navigating transition is replete with distinct challenges that are often dissimilar from the considerations of their peers living in more suburban and urban locales. Previous research has provided discussion of these complexities from the perspective of the individual (see Ní Laoire, 2000; Jamieson, 2000; Stockdale, 2002). Unlike other research on the transition to adulthood, which focuses on the societal trends and impacts of family systems, research on rural youth transitions takes into account the impact on and the impact of the community during this most important turning point. As discussed further in the methods section, the value of collecting personal narratives becomes paramount to understanding the

considerations and reasons people ultimately stay, leave, or return. Understanding differing trajectories requires careful consideration of unique values, practices, and constraints that underlie the coming of age process in rural community life.

Earlier works in geography and sociology approach the colloquial-named “staying,” “going,” and “returning” under the umbrella of studies in rural youth migration (see Ní Laoire, 2000; Jamieson, 2000; Stockdale, 2002). The predominant explanations for leaving include employment and educational opportunities, however, these aspects mask further complexities (Ní Laoire, 2000). Ní Laoire (2000) argues (a) that the decision-making process surrounding migration is multilayered and (b) that migration is a cultural phenomenon. Her assumption of migration as a cultural phenomenon is based on Halfacree and Boyle’s (1993) assertion that migration is associated with societal norms; that is, shared values, rules, and roles produce social structures and cultural practices of migration that continue to systematically reproduce themselves in “cultures of migration,” (Boyle, Halfacree, & Robinson, 1998, p. 207).⁶

Granting that there are multiple-dimensions and distinct considerations for rural youth, the decision to stay or leave relates to cultural values as much as social location.⁷ The impact of cultural context through a focus on place and people problematizes this research, creating a need to investigate the role of community members and shared ideologies, not only social factors, in influencing people’s decisions. The dynamic interplay of family, community, and social institution influences in combination with personal aspirations and economic forces provides a more thorough picture of how rural youth negotiate the transition into adulthood (Carr and Kefalas, 2006/2009). The amalgamation of considerations moves the focus of research to community influence and generates a need for looking at how context and groups impact rural

youth migration decisions over the course of the youth's life. Thus, studying the locality offers distinct cultural understandings of attitudes towards migration in relationship to place.

“Staying,” “going,” and “returning” is obfuscated with a myriad of interconnected complexities and considerations that influence migration acts and attitudes, complexities that become apparent in discourse. Ní Laoire (2000) writes that “[youth] migration reflects a process of negotiation between the various structures, desires, and values pulling in different directions” (p. 238). Coming to terms with these tensions is central to developing an understanding of how people come to terms with “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” With feelings of guilt and uncertainty emerged in the biographies she collected, Ní Laoire (2000) points out that “aspects of the migration experience are difficult to talk about for various reasons, and it could be argued that certain issues become taboo in particular situations” (p. 238). Ní Laoire (2000) theorizes:

Each life decision . . . reflects a process of negotiation which requires some kind of trade-off. Many choose pathways that require particular strength and will-power, or that reflect alternative values to the dominant discourses (p. 238).

The dominant cultural discourses continue to shape individual aspirations and the adoption of shared value systems, both through passive awareness and active evaluation over a lifetime. How these moments of transition are talked about reflects the rural town's communal assessment of transition, a coming to terms with an intricate cultural reality. Acts of staying and leaving among young adults do not occur in isolation, but rather are the result of the interplay between personal intention and contextual limitation. Discourse surrounding the role of community support and attitudes in an individual's decision reveals the tenuous role community members play, often making the decision to stay, leave, or return less of a decision. Rural towns demonstrate densely interconnected social networks and intensified community involvement that results in community members from outside one's own family playing a more significant role in

encouraging youth along various pathways (Carr and Kefalas, 2006). Community members invest their personal time and resources in the youth regardless of whether or not these youth are their children or grandchildren. This fact is made ever more evident by the ways rural community members rally around the sport teams or come out to celebrate milestones such as the Christmas program or high school graduation (Carr and Kefalas, 2006). Greater involvement implicated by integrated relationships among youth, family, and community members fosters community pride and sense of place. However, the encouragement of the most talented youth creates a social mechanism in which the community is promoting the most talented to leave (Carr and Kefalas, 2006). The systematic assumption that they will indeed leave the community arises among youth deemed talented, either athletically or academically. Conversely, youth who stay are most often those who are never instilled with a dream of leaving (Carr and Kefalas, 2006). Family, teachers, and community members encourage these youth to stick around, an act that requires little decision and maintains the status quo.

With conspicuous involvement in the development of youth, members of the community are integral in establishing tensions between staying and leaving and perpetuating their “culture of migration” (Boyle, Halfacree, & Robinson, 1998, p. 207), which contributes to a conundrum for the town. The practice of encouraging the best and brightest youth means that many of the educated leave and the population continues to decline. Carr and Kefalas (2009) appropriate the term “rural brain drain” to characterize this phenomenon. The term “brain drain” was first coined to describe the loss of British scientists and engineers to the United States (Johnson, 1965). “Brain drain” is now applied to characterize the loss of highly skilled workers from one locale to another, especially in terms of negative economic implications. For middle America the “rural brain drain” is another consequence of “staying” and “going” without “returning.”

The American farming community context holds distinct values that impact the “cultural of migration” (Boyle, Halfacree, & Robinson, 1998, p. 207). The Midwestern work ethic is one of the core values underlying experiences of growing up in rural towns (Carr and Kefalas, 2006). Youth from the small town are often employed throughout their teenage years, working alongside full-time adult workers or performing physically demanding work on their family’s farm, characteristics differing from their urban peers that instill a deeply seated appreciation for work earlier on in their lives (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). This value of work impacts staying and going; young people who focus on their job instead of their studies are most often the individuals who stay (Carr and Kefalas, 2006/2009). With that, schools play a key role in encouraging students to excel and pursue further education or, conversely, to work hard to develop practical skills that allowed them to secure jobs in the area (Carr and Kelfalas, 2006/2009). Approaches to marriage and family are impacted by the unique cultural complexities of the rural town. The need to conform to “a ‘schedule’ of goals ‘that people are supposed to follow’” reveals how youth are socialized to follow particular pathways and achieve milestones in a certain order (Carr and Kefalas, 2006, p. 22). That order proceeds along a basic traditional route of: graduate, get a job, get married, and start a family. While Carr and Kefalas do not elaborate on potential sanctioning, they point out that people who do leave are less like to follow this route, or at least do so at an extended pace and in a varied ordering. The act of securing a job, achieving one’s understood potential, and following the prescribed order are fundamental cultural markers of the entry into adulthood for rural youth.

Several classification systems have been developed by researchers to characterize and label people who stayed in, left, or returned to their rural hometown. Amidst questions about social class, Jamieson (2000) was systematically concerned with attachment to place, sense of

community, and attitudes towards leaving. Jamieson's work in the Scottish Border region developed a typology of youth migration based on a continuum of attachment and detachment in relationship to staying and going. "Attached 'stayers'" are rooted to their locality and find fulfillment in their employment and social networks. "Detached 'stayers'" express discontentment with aspects of their hometown and employment and/or have hopes to leave at some point in the future. These individuals often feel trapped by their current situation, yet these negative sentiments towards their hometown vary on a continuum. "Detached migrants" are aware early on in their lives that they want to leave and have no intentions of returning once they do. Finally, "attached migrants" continue to identify with aspects of their hometown and the relationships they had and continue to foster there. They also demonstrate varying ambitions to return to their hometown. Jamieson (2000) argues that it is easier for migrants to romanticize returning than it is for those who stay to conceive of leaving.

Stockdale (2002) classifies individual migration decisions of rural youth in the Scottish Border regions based on motivations including education; employment; personal, which includes a desire for novel experience and perceived claustrophobia; and other quality of life issues, which varied but included the availability of housing and services. Individuals in this final category are distinct, however, in so far as they are just as likely to move to another rural community as to an urban environment. Stockdale sought to expand the work of Ford, Quilgars, Burrows, and Please (1997) by further characterizing the experience of those who leave. Ford *et al.* identifies four groupings based on expectations and preferences. "Committed leavers" include those who seek further education. "Reluctant leavers" feel connected to their hometown, family, and friends but must leave in order to secure employment. "Committed stayers" sense of

belonging reigns superior to any desires or rationales for leaving. “Reluctant stayers” feel constrained by a lack of education and skill.

These taxonomies make way for the work of Carr and Kefalas (2006/2009) who develop five interrelated trajectories based on their field studies in a rural Midwestern community. The first two categories comprise the “Leavers.” “Achievers” are encouraged to leave based on their talents and ambitions. “Achievers” are the “best kids” who excelled in school, both academically and athletically (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 29). They receive immense community encouragement. Ultimately, they attend college and lead successful lives in locales that offer more opportunities for career advancement and diverse cultural experiences. The second category of “Leavers” is “Seekers” who leave for issues of personal development. These individuals value their newfound freedom to have experiences outside the boundaries of their hometown (i.e., they want to “get out of here”). In rural communities military service is most often the means of departure for “Seekers.” “Returners” are represented in next two distinct categories: “Boomerangs” and “High-Flyers.” “Returners” leave for similar reasons as “Achievers” and “Seekers”—educational opportunities and the call to experience life elsewhere. “Boomerangs” were once “Seekers” who then became disillusioned with the life they envisioned for themselves upon leaving. They return to settle into the familiar. “Boomerangs” also represent a type of “Returner” who leaves for instrumental reasons (e.g., vocational schooling or military service) and returns once they complete their required program or service. Most often these individuals planned to return all along. The other category of “Returners” are “High-Flyers” who return after furthering their education elsewhere to make a living as necessary professional and/or entrepreneurs in the community. “High-Flyers” represent the small portion of “Achievers” who are able to utilize their college degrees and access resources in their

hometowns. Finally, “Stayers” remain in the community. Often “Stayers” were not encouraged to leave nor did they have the resources to do so, even temporarily.

Previous research accounts for variance, such as degrees of attachment, negative attitudes, and social support and resources within categories of “Stayers” and “Leavers.”⁸ Despite pointing out how each label is interconnected, such research could benefit from further development of the intersection of labels, which risk being understood as monolithic. It is quite possible that people may identify with multiple or none of the labels appropriated.

Instead of characterizing experience based on whether someone stayed, left, or returned, this study looks towards the discursive negotiation of transition that occur both at the individual and the community level. In other words, this study is concerned with the preverbal “coming to terms with,” momentary questions of, and vacillation between “staying,” “going,” and later “returning” that reveal discursive performance of the rural community as a “culture of migration” (Boyle, Halfacree, & Robinson, 1998, p. 207). “Coming to terms with cultures” implies “contend[ing] with . . . the presence . . . of two or more cultural codes” (Philipsen, 2008, p. 3). In this instance, “coming to term with cultures” signals coming to terms with the “culture of migration,” the presence of two cultural codes, “staying” or “going.” Such contentious experience is illuminated by the conceptual framework of liminality, which provides further foundation for buttressing the overarching study.

Liminality

By illuminating complexities of the phenomenon not otherwise accounted for, liminality offers practical conceptual framework for understanding the larger process of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” and how people make sense of this experience. Turner (1969) describes liminality as being “betwixt and between various cultural positions,” (p. 95) of being neither one

nor the other. In this state one locates the self between recognized social/cultural identities, not fully identifying with either subject position. Liminality characterizes a space of contentions and continuous searching as one comes to terms with the influence of both identities on one's experience and the ways the individual comes to understand self and other.

Social anthropologists and sociologists have used the term 'liminality' to characterize the transitional stage into adulthood, between dependence and independence (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). Here the term is appropriated to functionally characterize a state of being between both an adolescent and an adult, yet not being fully either one. Liminality also characterizes ambivalence and tensions as the individual finds himself or herself "torn between practices and moral evaluations," an experience particularly salient in the transition into adulthood (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Merton & Barber, 1963; Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005, p. 22). During this transitional phase young adults formulate and establish their value systems by negotiating competing and disparate values and norms. Because these tensions are addressed within cohorts in a process of "becoming" liminal spaces are experienced not only at the individual level, but also within generations (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). One generation becomes associated with the acceptance or rejection of the values and practices of previous generations. Approaching "staying," "going," and "returning" from the lens of liminality acknowledges the continuous search and struggle that occurs as people negotiate the space between life stages and potential pathways.

The implication of "staying," "going," and "returning" is a residual state of pondering decisions, of being between options. The feeling of being "betwixt," while particularly salient for those who leave and return, is not devoid of the experience of those who stay in their hometown. For people in rural locales the moment of transition is one of disorientation, of

moving in a disconcerting space. The result can be moments of abashment and uncertainty. One can question how his or her decision will result in subjugation, rejection, or acceptance by the community. Conversely, personally accepting that one no longer has a monolithic identity grants the prospective to stand among vast potential, to freely reside amid contentious obligations. In discussing Van Gennep's (1960) work on ritual Turner (1974) argues for the existence of:

[A] moment when those being moved in accordance with a cultural script were liberated from normative demands, when they were, indeed, betwixt and between successive lodgments in jural political systems. In this gap between ordered worlds almost anything may happen.

In this interim of 'liminality,' the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements. (pp. 13-14)

Such an orientation towards liminality poses the possibility that one can successfully live in the liminal state. Moreover, its inclusion appropriates studying how people are able to negotiate boundaries and make sense of the "betwixt and between" space. Coming to terms with the process of "staying," "going," and "returning" requires such careful considerations of this space in relationship to the complexities of cultural locality.

Liminality is a helpful concept for coming to terms with and expanding on the existence of an intermediate, unresolved position. The liminality of the decision to stay, go, or whether to return acknowledges the feeling of being constantly between decisions and provides a valuable paradigm for understanding the contested space experienced by young adults and those who support them. The concept ushers back to the bigger umbrella of the phenomenon of rural youth migration. Liminality provides further foundation for this study by building on theories of identity constitution and the fluid boundaries of cultural life.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter one has included the introduction to the study and its exigency, the literature review, an exploration of the contribution of a communication studies perspective to understanding the phenomenon, the statement of research questions, and a subsequent preview of thesis chapters.

Chapter two provides detailed descriptions of the methodological approach and proceedings. This includes discussion of ethnographic methods for inquiry and analysis and ethical considerations of the researcher's identity. Chapter two also presents an overview of the speech community under study. This includes both historical and demographic information as well as thick ethnographic description of the scene garnered from field observations.

Chapters three, four, and five develop key themes for analysis from interview materials. Each analysis chapter includes fieldnote descriptions about everyday interaction in the community gathered prior to the interview stage of the study. Chapter three addresses research question one, how "staying," "going," and "returning" are conceptualized broadly by all members of the community, first through the discourses of young people and then through community members' narratives. Chapter four speaks to research question two and the taxonomy of terms used to describe the phenomenon. In the second analysis chapter "staying," "going," and "returning" are narrated through three specific expressions: "you come back," "it's (like) a family," and "everybody knows everybody." Chapter five, as the third analysis chapter, addresses research question three by speaking to how participant discourses reveal practices of "coming to terms with cultures" (Philipsen, 2008). The negotiation of multiple, divergent cultural codes of communication serve as the foundation for analysis and discussion in

developing a code of recognition that honors both values of collectivity and autonomy among young people.

Chapter six provides discussion, theoretical implications, and conclusions for the study. This conclusion includes the summation of key findings from the analysis chapters and future implications, research limitations, and my own thoughts upon completion of the study.

Endnotes

¹ In order to protect the privacy of the community and its residents, the rural community under study is not named. Due to infrequency of references a pseudonym will not be designated. Rather, general descriptors such the “rural community,” “small town,” and “community of study” are used. However, pseudonyms will be given to participants in an effort to maintain participant confidentiality and mitigate the risk of identification while also making them more personable to the reader. For further discussion please see the methods section of the thesis.

² For the purpose of this thesis the terms “interlocutor,” “participant,” “interviewee,” and “informant” are used synonymously. Spradley (1979) defines informants as “*native speakers...engaged by the ethnographer to speak in their own language or dialect. Informants provide a model for the ethnographer to imitate; the ethnographer hopes to learn to use the native language in the way informants do. Finally, informants are a source of information; literally, they become teachers for the ethnographer*” (emphasis in the original, p. 25). Informants can also be called interviewees (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Slight distinctions between participant and interlocutor, and interviewee and informant could be made for the purpose of delineating individuals participating in interaction noted in field observations versus those interviewed. However, the distinction is small and still refers to persons offering insights into the community. The term “member” is also utilized to characterize people who are part of the community of study (i.e., speech community) (see Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006; Saville-Troike, 2003; Philipsen, 1992).

³ As an incorporated municipality the state would deem the physical community in question a city. Using a government link to identify and define municipality would potentially identify or out the community under study; hence, I turn to the *American Heritage Dictionary* (4th ed.) which defines “municipality” as “a political unit, such as a city, town, or village, incorporated for local self-government” (n.p.). While designations vary from state to state, “town” is a defunct technical classification for this state. However, due to connotations of “city” with an urban location I use the word “town” to capture the rural locale and its smaller population. Moreover, participant discourses reveal a clear distinction between “city” and “town” in perceived lifestyle.

⁴ The decision is not bounded but rather the result of interaction. Carr and Kefalas (2009) argue that whether one remains or leaves is not confined to the result of personal decision, but rather is subject to adult investment in young people. In other words, social influences and subsequent opportunities precede individual agency. For instance, young people who leave are most often those who excelled in school and who had greater socioeconomic status.

⁵ With the approval of my thesis committee I submitted an Exempt Review to Colorado State University’s Institutional Review Board. I submitted and was approved to conduct observations beginning May 2011.

⁶ “Cultures of migration” was cited in Ní Laoire (2000) without the quotation marks. I find that the terms should be properly attributed to Boyle, Halfacree, & Robinson (1998) as a construct.

⁷ Following Ní Laoire (2000) I use the term “decision” although I personally am uncomfortable with the implication of personal agency as the sole variable of influence. I would assert, based on the previously noted research regarding community impact and socio-cultural variables, that the decision to remain or leave is also subject to cultural influences and social limitations.

⁸ The terms “stayer” and “leaver” were both used as colloquial descriptor in conjunctions with other adjectives by Jamieson (2000); Stockdale (2002); and Ford, Quilgars, Burrows, and Please (1997); the two terms were not capitalized in their scholarship. However, throughout the thesis I capitalize the terms for parody with the term “Returner.” Carr and Kefalas (2006/2009) nuanced the previous taxonomies with three central characterization “Stayers,” “Leavers,” and “Returners.” Because the “Returner” language is directly cited to Carr and Kefalas (2006/2009) and central to my work I give them credit for my appropriations.

Chapter Two

Divided into three sections, this chapter provides (1) description of methodological approaches and practices that ground the study and situate subsequent analysis, (2) considerations of my own relationship to the topic and community of inquiry, and (3) a brief introduction to the speech community.

Methods

The outline of procedures is sub-divided into five sections. First, ethnographic methodology and procedures for analysis are discussed. Second, the two-phase processes, participant observations and ethnographic interviews, for collecting research materials that become the data for analysis are detailed. This section also includes an outlining of the member check process. Third, the narrative approach for conducting ethnographic interviews is situated. Fourth, a thorough description of participant groups is given. Finally, discussion of confidentiality and community naming is detailed.

Methodological Foundations of Inquiry and Analysis: Ethnography of Communication

This study is grounded in the Ethnography of Communication, an approach to studying communication from the perspective of *ways of speaking*, the “relationships among speech events, acts, and styles, on the one hand, and personal abilities and roles, contexts and institutions, and beliefs, values, and attitudes, on the other” (Hymes, 1974, p. 45). An ethnographic approach studies the speech of a given community in a specific context so as to recognize patterns and social categories of meaning. Hymes (1974) asserts that beyond linguistic content language is not devoid of context and function; ethnographic communicative inquiry recognizes the situated communicative event and its cultural impact on social life. Based on the assumption that language in interaction categorizes human experience, ethnographic research

seeks qualitative, *emic* descriptions that account for diversity in speaking. Determining the localized system of speaking requires discovering the local taxonomy of terms (Hymes, 1974). These terms for activity provide understanding about the function of speech in the community. Hymes (1974) argues, “Sociolinguistic description and taxonomy are joint conditions of success for understanding and explaining the interaction of language and social life” (p. 66).

In order to develop necessary descriptions of communicative diversity and taxonomies Hymes (1972/1974) provides the researcher with an analytical tool, the mnemonic SPEAKING model. The “S” refers to Setting—the time, place, and physical situation of the speech act—and Scene—the ‘psychological setting’ or cultural definition of the situation (Hymes, 1972, p. 60). “P” stands for Participants. “E” introduces Ends, the purpose of the speech event in terms of both goals and outcomes. Act, represented by “A” in the model, characterizes message form—*how* something is said—and message content—*what* is said. Key, or “K,” describes “the tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done” (Hymes, 1972, p. 62). The “I” stands for Instrumentalities, the choice of channels for transmission and the choice of linguistic code, in this proposed study, face to face, *in situ* interactions. “N” specifies the Norms of interaction and interpretations. Finally, Genre, the “G,” categorizes reoccurring types of speech acts and events, such as small talk, ceremonial speaking, or sermons. The SPEAKING model provides a systematic means for observing and interpreting ways of speaking.

In ethnography the collection of research materials that turn to data cannot be separated from the analysis, which occurs throughout the observation and interview process.¹ Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland (2006) point out that “analysis *emerges* from the *interaction* of gathered data (task 1) and focusing decision (task 2)” (emphasis in the original, p. 4). The very act of recording fieldnotes denotes interpretation. The interpretation of observations thus begins

in the procedures for collecting research materials with the themes emerging directly from and remaining grounded in the eventual data. A grounded theory approach to data analysis means theory is continually, systematically, and directly developed out of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this study the analysis of communicative events proceeds through a concert of participant-observation and interviewing with careful attention given to the emergence of cultural meaning in informants' talk. Following the grounded theory approach, analysis proceeds through a focusing of the research materials, a careful search for relationships among components and reoccurring themes in the observations and interviews. This involves immersion and the transformation of the raw research material into data and findings that offer insights to the phenomena at hand (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Coding systematizes the process and begins with open coding, or initial coding, the process of identifying concepts, categories, properties, variation, and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following open coding, selective coding involves "integrating and refining theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143). Beyond Hymes's SPEAKING model as an analytic tool, taxonomies are developed through the coding process.

Research Phase One: Field Observation

In the first phase, conducted during the summer of 2011, I collected preliminary field observations of the town. Prior to entering the field and with the approval of my thesis committee a "Request for Exemption for the Use of Human Subjects in Research" was submitted to Colorado State University's Research Integrity and Compliance Review Office; IRB ID 071-12H was granted by Institutional Review Board administration on May 26, 2011. The purpose of this research was to observe everyday behaviors that would further allow me to establish questions and methods for inquiry. While ultimately I am interested in communication practices

surrounding a specific topic and was generally and informally attentive to any conversations that offered insights into the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning,” I collected field observations about the general cultural tone and shared community spaces. This involved taking notes of settings, situations and interactions at various speech events in a variety of public venues at diverse times and on different days of the week throughout the summer. Observations were recorded in the form of descriptions, interpretations, and researcher impressions immediately following attendance and participation (see Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I created an observation matrix document for hand written notes. After initial weeks in the field I began transcribing these notations into the word processing document I had used to originally create the observation guide (see Appendix A: Fieldnote Sample).

Research Phase Two: Interviewing

After initial discussions with my advisor and staff from Colorado State University’s Research Integrity and Compliance Review Office, the office that oversees Institutional Review Board proposals, an expedited review request was recommended. Hence, for this phase of research material collection an expedited review protocol of the project and data collections methods was submitted for approval following successful defense of the prospectus and endorsement of the protocol. IRB Protocol ID 11-2653H was approved on November 2, 2011. Interviewing commenced following protocol approval and continued until early January 2012.

Phase two of the research process involved ethnographic interviews with participants. Although participant observation is considered the preeminent methods for field studies, intensive interviewing in the form of “ordinary conversation and listening as it occurs naturally during the course of social interaction and semi-structured interviewing” remains a complementary process (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 17). The focus remains

on everyday talk. Interviewing provides a means to supplement observation and ask focused questions that augment the study of the phenomenon beyond what I have direct access to in observations of everyday interaction. In this study interviewing allows me to gain insights into “staying,” “going,” and “returning” that would be difficult to discern without asking more concentrated, yet broad questions drawn from field observations.

A total of 11 interviews lasting between 20-45 minutes were completed—six with young adults and five with other, older community members.² Eleven interviews represent approximately 5 percent of the town population (225) or approximately 2.5 percent of the zip code population (450), which includes the town and surrounding farms. The number of interviews is also based on considerations of efficiency and practicality for a thesis project. Recruitment by the CO-PI, conducted over the phone and in person, is based on a purposeful sampling of informants as it allows for “learn[ing] about select cases or variation across a set of cases” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, pp. 91-93) (see Appendix B: Recruitment Script). “Purposeful sampling” is also known as judgmental sampling (see Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 91). Baxter and Babbie (2003) point out that “purposive or judgmental sampling,” as they refer to it, allows the researcher to select his or her sample based on “knowledge of the population, its elements, and the nature of . . . [the] research aims” (p. 135). In other words, sampling is grounded in researcher judgment and the purpose of the research. Sampling is based on characteristics outlined below in the participants sub-section.

Interviews proceed through a general interview guide that is the same for all participants and focuses on their life story.³ The script begins with a short explanation of the project and purpose as well as the direction of the interview before asking for verbal consent (see Appendix C: Interview Protocol). Participants are also given a detachable slip with the contact information

of the Primary Investigator (PI) and Co-Primary Investigator (CO-PI).⁴ After sharing terms of voluntary participation, participants are encouraged to talk in their “native language”—how they would talk to others in the cultural space (Spradley, 1979).⁵ The interview guide contains four broad clusters of questions intended to engage participants in narratives about their relationships, experiences, and attitudes towards life in the community (see Appendix C: Interview Protocol). The practice of sharing narratives about their lives is intended to allow participants to reveal something about the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” in a more colloquial fashion. The final question series asks more directly about the phenomenon and is particularly useful when participants’ narratives remain more ambiguous in relation to experiences of youth migration. Probing questions stay within the local language and ask more specific questions relating to the phenomenon and individual informant responses (Spradley, 1979). This is in line with Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) theoretical sampling: “sampling on the basis of emerging concepts” (p. 73). Completed interviews were audio-recorded given participants’ consent and immediately transcribed for analysis.⁶

While my role as researcher was to facilitate the interview, as an ethnographer of communication I am a listener. I draw on Spradley’s (1979) practices of asking descriptive, structural, and contrast questions that get at nuanced understanding, inquiring further into participants’ narratives. In seeking to understand the meanings articulated in narratives I use probing questions that ask participants to elaborate on reoccurring themes or key terms in their narratives that may further reveal something about the phenomenon. I attempt to use the language of the interviewees whilst continuing to situate myself within the role of the researcher (Spradley, 1979). While I am interested in young adult migration and how the town currently

makes sense of the phenomenon, I did not discount narratives from community members about their own extended past practices of “staying,” “going,” and “returning.”

Member check procedures.

Following interpretation of research material and open coding of raw data into themes five follow-up interviews with participants were conducted to confirm that research findings are in line with participants’ experiences. The practice of conducting member checks allows for validation from community members of observations and analysis and seeks to reduce biases (Robson, 2002; Baxter & Babbie, 2003; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). When asked in the initial interview, ten of the 11 informants agreed to be contacted for a member check. Informants were contacted over the phone to ask if they would still be willing to participate in the member check (see Appendix D: Member Check Re-contact Script). While anticipated to last no more than 30 minutes, member checks lasted approximately 10-15 minutes. Due to ambiguity regarding the medium of member checks in the approved Protocol ID 11-2653H an amendment to the protocol was submitted on January 31, 2012 and notice of approved from Colorado State University’s Research Integrity and Compliance Review Office was received on February 9, 2012. This amendment clarifies potential mediums for conducting member checks as in-person, over the phone, and via email and includes a member check re-contact script and member check protocol paralleling the structure for IRB compliancy of the interview protocol (see Appendix D: Member Check Re-contact Script & Appendix E: Member Check Protocol). Member checks ask for verbal content of voluntary participation and audio-recording. Follow-up questions are clustered around four themes from analysis (see Appendix E: Member Check Protocol). Recruitment took place over the phone and all member checks took

place in person during March 2012. Three young people and two adults participated in member checks.

Methodological Foundations of Inquiry and Analysis: Narrative Approach

The study of youth migration is complimented by the biographical (narrative) approach. This approach is situated in the understanding of how individual life histories are comprised of past decisions, present situations, and future plans that are subject to cultural understandings in relation to locality. While migration implies theorizing macro-level social phenomena, Halfacree and Boyle (1993) and Ní Laoire (2000) call for studying migration through individual biographies by arguing that these personal accounts reflect social structures. To appropriate a communication studies term, such *narratives* reveal vital insights into how the context of where one lives influences the choices and constraints surrounding the decision-making process. By asking rural youth to recount their biographies in terms of possible choices, subsequent constraints, and plans as young adults the researcher learns not only about an individual's decision making process, but moreover discovers how these decisions are situated within a larger cultural migration narrative.

Narrative research gets at the heart of life experience. The process of telling narratives is motivated by a need to make sense of human experience. Fisher's (1987) Narrative Paradigm is based on the presupposition that human beings are innate story-tellers who order their experience based on the interpretation of stories. The construction of these stories is influenced by context. By asking the individual to recount personal stories I seek to understand how stories articulate meaning and significance not otherwise shared outside the prosaic story-telling act. The humanistic process of the collecting stories is appropriate in this instance because it allows informants to articulate their life histories in such a way that situates self within the community

and characterizes transitional turning points that impacted their own “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” How and what is recounted, what they feature, who they include, and how stories intersect reveals how interlocutors construct their own life histories as connected to the town.

By using a narrative approach I adapt Spradley’s elements of the ethnographic interview. I continue to draw on the practices of asymmetrical turn taking, expressing interest, and restating and incorporating informants’ terms (Spradley, 1979). Furthermore, I find that narrative inquiry will better help me establish rapport with interlocutors due to my own highly negotiated role in the community. A narrative approach allows me to engage participants in personal story-telling instead of asking directed questions about the community that may violate my assumed knowledge of cultural codes as an acculturated member of the community.⁷

Procedure: Participants

Ethnographic fieldwork is rooted in cultural descriptions which strive “to witness how those studied perceive, feel, and act in order to understand their perceptions, feelings, and behaviors more fully and intimately” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 3) through direct observation and researcher participation. This form of interpretative and descriptive field study occurs at the community level. Gumperz (1962) characterizes community according to common locality and primary site of interaction for and among members (see also Hymes, 1974). Participants share a common identification with the town as a physical location and place of origin (i.e., hometown). Moreover, their connection to the town is based on relationships to and interactions with one another. Consideration of shared values and beliefs as well as everyday interaction is implicated. Membership is not limited to the town’s physical boundaries that become obscure when one considers the surrounding farm places.

There are two groupings of interview participants: young people and community members. In this study, young people are characterized as people between the ages of 18-30, born after 1980, and who graduated from high school after 2000. In other words, I am primarily concerned with the so-called twenty-somethings who represent a cross section of the population who have more recently discerned questions of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” and who have done so under more similar social circumstances. In U.S. American individualist culture the age 18 is associated with independence and adult responsibility. One’s 18th birthday culturally implies entry into adulthood and legal adult status, even if this transition begins earlier and continues into one’s twenties. Socially, 18 year olds are considered adults. Thus, as a socially significant birthday I propose interviewing people who have reached this transitional, cultural milestone associated with autonomy and individual freedom.

As participants, young people in this study may currently live in, may have returned to, or may have left the area. The association to the community for those who have left is maintained through (a) having resided and participated in community life throughout their youth, (b) having graduated from high school during this time, and (c) having continued relationships with people who reside in the community. This subgroup potentially visits for special events and holidays. I sought to the best of my ability to further divide the young people sample (a) among individuals who have stayed, left and returned, and who have not returned and (b) equally among young women and young men for reasons of speaking to sex and gender issues. Participants include one individual who had left and not returned, four young adults who had left and returned, and one person who had never left the community—four females and two males.

Community members for the purpose of this study represents participants who presently live in and participate in community life. These individuals are likely parents, grandparents, and

other older adults invested in young people. Community participants have held extended residency, although they may have left at various points in their lives as well or grew up in another place. Shared history and continued community involvement demonstrate an affinity for the town remains the key to identifying potential informants. Again, 11 interviews were conducted—six with young people and five with community members. Four women and one man take part in community member interviews. Further descriptions are given in chapter three.

Procedure: Confidentiality and Community Naming

Maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of individuals' responses is paramount. Upon agreement to participate informants were made aware of their rights and were immediately briefed on the purpose and procedures of the interview in generic terms (see Appendix B: Recruitment Script). I requested that interviews be recorded for later transcription. While this was the choice of the interviewee, all interlocutors obliged. Interlocutors were informed the only known potential risk of participation surrounded the possibility that a third part could see the researcher and informant speaking and know that that individual was participant in the study. To minimize this risk interviews took place in private homes.⁸ To ensure the privacy of informants, while maintaining the integrity of their interview responses, pseudonyms have been assigned to the interviewees in final reporting (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Verbal alteration of written consent is used so as not to gather and thus have documentation of participants' identities. Informants agreed both to the terms of volunteer participation and to be audio-recorded on record. These questions of consent are part of the interview transcripts that were promptly transcribed following each interview.

Upon the encouragement of Colorado State University's Research Integrity and Compliance Review Office, I have made the strategic decision not to provide the name of the

community under study. This decision comes with careful consideration of two famous small town studies, which chose to obscure location and identifying information, as well as arguments against their decision to do so. Lynd and Lynd's (1929) book *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* provides a critical depiction of the small town they called Middletown in an undisclosed decision to obscure place and protect it from negative ramifications (Wolfe, 2003). Despite its fictive name, Middletown was eventually identified as Muncie, Indiana, which turned out to relish in the attention the study brought. However, communities are not always pleased with depictions and researchers' presentations. Vidich and Bensman's (1958) *Small Town in Mass Society: Class, Power, and Religion in Rural Communities* raised serious ethical concerns about research in small towns including issues of community trust and the difficulty in maintaining participant anonymity and town privacy. Although Vidich and Bensman too provided a fictive name, Springdale, their harsh criticisms conveyed a disregard for participants' way of life that left the community enraged ("Editorial: Freedom and Responsibility," 1958). Their methodologies demanded further interrogation after claims they compromised their own integrity by not being transparent with participants about the intentions of their research.

Both of these studies implicate how community reactions must be considered. Ultimately, the rural community of the proposed study is small enough that changing participants' names is not sufficient for maintaining confidentiality. Simply providing pseudonyms does not preserve privacy if the town is known. I disagree with Wolfe (2003) who argues that towns as public institutions do not have the same rights to privacy as individuals. I find, in this instance, any attempts to maintain individuals' privacy are tied to attempts to maintain the town's right to privacy from outside branding. I am not choosing to refrain from

using the name of the community I am studying because I hold an agenda to harshly criticize it. Rather, small towns are often founded on a unique sense of pride and community unity that I wish to be sensitive to in the study. The collective identity of both the small town and its people is compromised when the researcher chooses to identify the place and thus eases the opportunity to identify informants and subsequently, perhaps unintentionally, foster division within the rural town as well as consequently label the town for outsiders. My goal is to work my best to preserve the integrity of the town in addition to remaining sensitive to what interlocutors' discourses reveal about their personal relationships and the way their small town is understood.

While I may disagree with aspects of Wolfe's (2003) arguments against distorting town identities, the need to justify the continuing the practice of not providing community names is granted. First, Wolfe argues that not naming the actual research site absolves the researcher of criticism and makes verification of results impossible, and I would add that replicability by another researcher becomes limited. I respond that the methods and findings of this study are still open to critique and questioning. In fact, I would argue that as a researcher I have a greater personal accountability towards the presentation of findings and representation of procedures. Moreover, not naming the town does not imply that I will not entertain perspectives that diverge from my interpretations. In the end, Wolfe's argument that by inventing names "we cannot know for sure what is being observed" (p. B13) privileges an objective approach to research that discounts the role of researcher's interpretation in the presentation of findings.

Wolfe's second consideration asserts that obscuring the identity of the town distorts reality and fictionalizes place. Depictions of the town exclude and alter significant features and details that result in "bland" characterizations (p. B13). I think that ethnographies can still be replete with engaging details that describe the reality of the town. Wolfe's article makes the

ethnographer cognizant of this need in his or her writing.⁹ In the end, Wolfe advocates for transparency in ethnographic research, an assertion I agree with, yet with amendments to help preserve the privacy and confidentiality of those to whom I have spoken.

Researcher Relationship to Community and Topic

Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006) suggest that field studies arise from aspects and queries from the researcher's life experience and situation, what they term "starting where you are" (p. 10). From their perspective some of the highest quality ethnographic research is grounded in current or past experiences of the researcher, whether or not these connections are explicit or implicit in the final reporting. They contend that field studies require (a) intellectual curiosity, either in personal experience or academic research, reading, and conversation, and (b) access to the appropriate participants and setting for gathering data (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Fieldwork within the researcher's own speech community allows the ethnographer to question his or her own enculturation and acculturation (Saville-Troike, 2003). Such introspective methods ground my inquiry in the tensions among the first cultures I learned in my youth and the cultures I have subsequently learned and adapted to be a part of over time. (Beyond the 8th grade graduation story,) I began this study with my own personal biography and curiosity; I found a need to intellectually investigate a complicated aspect of my own life. To use the language appropriated for this study, I am a "Leaver—Achiever" with ambivalent "Returner" tendencies (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).¹⁰ In effect, I would qualify to be a participant in my own research.

Upon graduation from high school I left my Midwestern hometown for one of the nearest metropolitan areas, of which I was already familiar, where I attended college. My decision to move to the city had little to do with an aspiration for an urban lifestyle, but rather the relative

proximity of the institution to my home and family. My decision to attend a mid-sized private university over the large state land-grant institutions or small liberal arts colleges in the region had more to do with the outstanding regional reputation of my alma mater than rejecting the chosen college experiences of many of my friends and contemporaries (i.e., “farm kids”). That said, the logic of my choice, while not fully understood as a high school senior, was ultimately based on a “sense of community” experienced during my visit.

I never questioned while growing up that I would attend a four-year university; it was assumed that I would obtain a bachelor’s degree. In fact, my small town offered me scholarship money throughout my college education. In high school my career aspirations, while enigmatic, remained grounded in my identity of growing up in rural America. I never questioned leaving and returning or dreamt about “getting out of here;” I assumed after college I would settle within at least a few hours of my hometown and my family, perhaps in at least a slightly more populated area than where I grew up if I did not return there.

In college I found my rural identity to be a minority position among my peers and one that became less salient in everyday interaction. However, this same aspect of self always seemed to be informing how I understood the world and would even provide me with an internship opportunity and unique topics for research papers. While I went home every summer, holiday recess, and often during mid-semester breaks, my future seemed to be leading me away from my hometown. I found myself struggling with my subject position, with “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” I found myself dialectally pulled in opposing directions. I felt like a member of my hometown and yet simultaneously a member of divergent groups in other places. I had a nostalgia for family and place that brought me back, but simultaneously found myself

needing to leave. In the end, my hometown did not seem that far from my university, but my university seemed like a long, long way away from my hometown.

For instance, in the later summers of my undergraduate years I would return home to participate in rural community life, yet work in the city, spending more than half the week residing in the same house I grew up in and the remainder of the week staying at my campus apartment with my roommate. My double life was ever more complicated by study abroad opportunities, academic conference preparations, spending time with friends, profound respect for the bucolic farmland, obligations to family, and the impinging questions of life after I graduated. In the end, my commuter identity left me forlorn. “Returning” involved more than “visiting” the (once) familiar cultural spaces. Yet “staying” brought about a sense of unrequited wanderlust. Practically speaking, opportunities were more abundant if I chose not to return. In attempting to reconcile my own dissonance I began to question the potential reaction of family and my hometown and subsequent acceptance or dismissal of my likely, yet not entire, departure.

Following much discernment surrounding my decision, I had to come to terms with the prospect of “going.” After graduating with a BA in Communication Studies I moved to Colorado to pursue an MA degree. In the end, I did not even settle within the region. Several hundred miles of interstate highway separate me from the corn fields I had for so long taken for granted and the hometown and people that shaped me. Nearly six years after graduating from high school I still find myself curious about the trajectory that led me to leave my hometown¹¹ and the sense of rootedness that beckons me to return, even for the short-term. Moreover, I consider myself a part of a generation who finds itself pulled away from rural America, yet part of a delegation who laments with respect and nostalgia for this place. This brief telling of my own “staying” and “going” story is one of many I believe go unexplored. In effect, it is only an

allusion to the more detailed interview narratives I hope illuminate the phenomenon through field study. In the end, “staying,” “going,” and “returning” is the complex and negotiated reality of rural small towns. Understanding the phenomenon for both the individual and community provides a topic for intellectual inquiry grounded both in salient real-world problems as well as in the researcher’s personal history.

In addition to an intellectual curiosity Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006) indicate that fieldwork requires access to a community suitable to the topic of inquiry. The researcher must possess some familiarity with potential locales. My entrance is facilitated by extended identification and (evolving) membership. My family has been established in the community for several generations. My parents are members of the church that I have attended throughout my life. I met some of my closest friends today in Sunday school at age three. I attended kindergarten through third grade in the now closed Catholic grade school with nearly the same 20 classmates until we all went to the public high school. I continue to be involved in the community when I return, participating in community events and such, despite my extended absence while working on my master’s degree.

The biography I provide above situates my knowledge of and familiarity with the research location. Studying a familiar locale provides me with the opportunity to draw on my own knowledge as a source of interpretation for “plumb[ing] the depths and explor[ing] the subtle interconnections of meaning in ways that the outsider could only attain with great difficulty,” thus furthering the existential/phenomenological function of ethnography (Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 90). However, my dedication to studying a familiar location and interviewing previously known individuals requires careful considerations. Not all practitioners are keen with Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland’s (2006) suggestion of “starting where you are” (p.10).

For instance, Spradley (1979) argues that “the most productive relationship [between ethnographer and informant] occurs between a thoroughly enculturated informant and a thoroughly *unenculturated* ethnographer” (emphasis in the original, p. 50). Concerns arise over the researcher’s ability to notice cultural distinctions in a familiar community and negotiate his or her role as ethnographer. The nuanced differences of familiar cultural scenes are made more difficult to discern resulting in a more arduous analysis. With that, Spradley (1979) cautions against interviewing a friend, relative, or other familiar individuals. Members of the speech community expect the researcher to behave as a member of the community. When this does not happen confusion occurs between the roles of friend and informant and the nuanced difference in conversation between the two. Often participants are unable to assume complete ignorance of the researcher and provide thick description of cultural complexities required (Saville-Troike, 2003; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland, 2006; Spradley, 1979). If the informant believes that the researcher’s knowledge already provides answers to their questions the informant is more likely to feel that the researcher is insulting their individual intelligence.

Negotiating the complex role of researcher in this instance requires careful adoption of strategies to minimize potential concerns. I must acknowledge my own participation and the subsequent dynamic interplay that occurs with my role as ethnographer. In doing so, I keep an awareness of my complex relationship to the subject and community at the forefront of observations and interviewing, accounting for how this impacts my access and interpretation. First, I must remain diligent to the task of noting cultural complexities that I may take for granted. Comparing and contrasting is a productive strategy when attempting to study one’s own “ways of speaking” (Saville-Troike, 2003). Second, I must be direct about my purposes and intentions as ethnographer; I have to be proactive about ensuring I am motivating thick

description from informants. For instance, I will have to carefully articulate that I am interested in informants' own stories and perceptions. I must be careful to not overly insert my opinions. Additionally, I must also keep in mind my own status in the community. I avow to still being a part of this community, however, I have left in order to further my own educational goals. Some may understand me to be a member of the community while others may not. As a result the ascription of qualities on me as researcher could be varied from one informant to the next. With that, I have to be aware of how I negotiate my own face and use language.

Although there are many complexities to consider when conducting ethnographic fieldwork I firmly believe my own positionality is an asset rather than a hindrance to my project. (I explore subsequent negotiations of positionality in the conclusion.) By situating myself within the community and topic I affirm my awareness of the complex negotiations of personal identity that inform my interpretations. In the end, my study remains rooted in Spradley's (1979) recommendation that superlative ethnographic research begins with an interest in human problems rather than a culture, area of the world, or theory. In my case the problems just so happens to parallel my own experience.

Brief Introduction of the Speech Community

At present this Midwestern town has a declining population of approximately 225 people—121 females and 104 males—residing on less than 0.5 square miles of land.¹² The town is surrounded by farms whose inhabitants grow this number to roughly 450 (according to the zip code populations) through residency and community participation. Demographically, 2010 U.S. Census data characterizes over 96% of the population as identifying as White. Other residents indicate “White-Asian,” “White-American Indian and Alaska-Native,” or “Some Other Race.” In terms of ancestry, 180 people selected German followed by 32 individuals who avow to Irish

heritage. German as a descriptor is mentioned in passing by one interlocutor (i.e., Chris) who alludes to the united identification of the community of study with four similar, neighboring small towns as “the German colonies.” I know from my own experience growing up in the area that the German heritage of these five rural communities is an underlying source of pride for individuals that parallels their shared Catholic avowals. At the center of the community physically and symbolically is its 100 plus year old Catholic Church, an ornate structure of Gothic-architecture that represents the generations of people who have been baptized, made First Holy Communion, were confirmed, married, and entered into eternal life within the walls of the church. I, along with my eight other classmates from the community, celebrated my high school graduation with a special Sunday morning mass in this church. I would confirm that weekend mass is a key social and spiritual event for the community. Five of the interlocutors in this study directly cite the Catholic identity of the town while all 11 speak to the importance of the parish, church, and church hall/school in everyday life. One young person (i.e., Nicole) concludes “everybody around here is pretty much Catholic,” while another (i.e., Leah) attests that “Catholicism is so deep in my bones.” Although “there’s a few un-Catholics [*sic*] or people who don’t go to church,” the concentration on shared Catholic identity is underscored in one community member’s (i.e., Sandra) statement, “And sometimes around here they [take] being Catholic for granted.” Most community members are also church members.

According to 2010 U.S. Census data 25% of the populations is 18 years old and under, and 21% of the population is 62 years of age or over. The median age is 40.5. Socio-economically, individuals can be classified generally as working and middle class. Over 60% of the population had incomes of \$35,000-\$99,999 with the median income \$48,750. As maximum and minimum incomes, only 6% of the population earned \$150,000-\$199,999 annually while

31% reported yearly incomes of \$10,000-\$34,999. In terms of education, of the population ages 18 to 24, 20% could be assumed to still be in high school during the census, 22% were high school graduates, 50% had some college or an associated degree, and 8% had a bachelor's degree or higher. One can presume that the 50% identified as having some college education include those individuals still in college. Among the population 25 and older, 48% had some college or an associate's degree, 11% had bachelor's degrees, while no one reported holding graduate or professional degrees. However, I know in my own colloquial knowledge that there are a very few number of people in the community who have master's degrees. At the time of the census 20 people were enrolled in college and graduate school.

Geographically, the nearest metropolitan area is over an hour away. Schools and local shopping in the county seat of 5,000 are a 15 minute drive. Those driving along the county highway that runs along the edge of town paralleling the railroad tracks are greeted with patriotic banners on the light poles. Such banners bare the names of community families and businesses who donated the banners in preparation for the town's quasi-centennial celebration a few years ago. At Christmas these banners are replaced with lighted angels, stars, and trees that celebrate the season. Continuing through town, the road bends along houses, the grain elevator, the old lumber yard, and the operational gas station. On a trip up one side of Main Street one would see the bank, the town bar and grill, a plumbing business, a beautician shop, the post office, another restaurant, and the grocery store. On the other side of the street is a historic, non- operational, gas and service station; the building housing the town's telephone system; a general construction business in the former fire hall, which was relocated to the northwest part of town where a larger lot could accommodate a new more spacious building; the city hall; and an insurance business. As one turns the street corner north between the restaurant and grocery store the church comes

into view just beyond the car wash. Further down is the old school and current parish cafeteria complex, the central community gathering space. Driving through town one cannot help but notice the flower pots festively maintained by community members throughout the season (e.g., lush annual flowers in the spring and summer as well as Christmas trees at the holidays).

Economically, in addition to the businesses mentioned, the town is sustained by a regional freight hauling corporation, a grain elevator and farm/chemical supply business, a catering business in connection with grocery store, as well as other services including welders, general contractors, and beauticians. Recreationally, the town has its own tennis courts, park, baseball/softball diamond, and a playground left from the former Catholic elementary school, which closed less than a decade ago. The school building, which belongs to the parish, has its own gymnasium that is used for a variety of functions from basketball games to wedding receptions. Farms primarily growing corn and soybeans and raising cattle and hogs surround the town. Beyond its economic and recreational viability the town sustains itself through its people who remain committed to each other and the community. Yet residents of town and surrounding area cannot meet all of their needs in the community. Work, school, healthcare, shopping, and recreation must also be sought in other locales, even for those who remain as residents.

Even a few years after the event the town's quasi-centennial continues to be a source of pride for the community and is discussed by interlocutors. This event re-established some community traditions (e.g., Wednesday night drawings) and more importantly brought people who had grown up and left the community back to celebrate their shared heritage

This chapter has addressed methodological and analytical research practices, researcher self-reflexivity, and provided initial detailing of the community. These procedures and discussion serve as the foundation for forthcoming analysis chapters.

Endnotes

¹ Following the practice of referring to ethnographic fieldnotes and interview transcripts as “research materials” taught by his mentor, Dr. Gerry Philipsen of the University of Washington, Dr. Eric Aoki has passed down the practice of using the language “research materials” instead of “data” to me. “Data” become the specific portions of the “research materials” that serve as sources for analysis and argument.

² Because of the cultural significance of one 18th birthday on perceived independence and entry into adulthood, minors were not included in the subject population.

³ Protocols and recruitment scripts for both interview and member checks scored at the IRB required eighth grade level on the Flesh-Kincaid Readability scale.

⁴ Following IRB practices the thesis advisor is listed as the Primary Investigator (PI) and the MA candidate is listed as Co-Primary Investigator (CO-PI). All recruitment, interviews, and members checks were conducted by the CO-PI and thesis author, also referred to as “I” in the thesis document.

⁵ The interview process required dynamic negotiations of my role as researcher and known member of the community, particularly my ability to code switch. I consider myself adept at using the cultural codes of the community because these are in fact my first socialized speech codes. However, I have appropriated myself into other codes including that of the academic community and subsequent researcher identity. Thus, I remained diligent with my negotiations of language usage, interviewee perceptions of my role, and awareness of potentially taken for granted meanings.

⁶Transcription proceeded though multiple-listenings of the tapes and then worked for a content-based transcription as opposed to capturing pauses and the like in more intricate methodologies.

⁷ Throughout the thesis document I appropriate the term “narrative” to describe informants’ responses in interviews. I prefer this term (1) because I find “narrative” to convey stronger ethos than “stories” and (2) “narrative” is more in line with communication studies scholarship and theory.

⁸ In some instances family members were home at the time of the interview. In these cases, I allowed the informant to guide us to a private space that they were comfortable. Several participants indicated to me that they had enthusiastically told others that they were volunteering for the study.

⁹ I sought to remain diligent towards maintaining the poetics of discourse, while carefully interrogating whether identifying information was embedded.

¹⁰ I do not, however, fit within the “High-Flyer” or “Boomerang” classifications of “Returners” because I have not returned to the community permanently (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

¹¹ “Hometown” refers to the small town that serves as the subject of my field study. However, my affinity for place is expressed more comprehensively for the local area. Because, among other factors, the need for goods and services and the amalgamation of children in the school systems means that people from the various surrounding towns interact continually, the boundaries of one’s “hometown” are simultaneously rigid and fluid.

¹² Demographic information referenced was gathered from 2010 U.S. Census data on American Fact Finder accessed on April 10, 2012. In order to maintain confidentiality of the community direct citations to this data cannot be provided.

Chapter Three

The questions, “What are you going to do when you graduate from high school?” and “So where are you going to go to college?” become ever more complicated for young adults from rural small towns as they come to terms with the reality that going to college requires moving away from the familiar people and places they have come to deeply know. For the rural community members who have in the past as well as presently care genuinely about their youth, the departure of recent high school graduates marks yet another class leaving with hopes that perhaps a few will someday return. Chapter three broadly engages discourses embodying the complex cultural considerations surrounding practices of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” among young people. Narratives garnered from ethnographic interviews in one U.S. American small town respond to research question one, which asks:

RQ 1: How do people in a rural community make sense of young people’s (i.e., 18-30 years of age) practices of staying, leaving, and returning to their hometown?

Analysis proceeds with the intent of coalescing narrative discourses that name dynamic complexities experienced by individuals from the rural community. Narratives are illuminated first through the voices of the community’s young people and then from the insights of its community members, setting the stage for taking up the second and third research questions in later chapters. In order to further situate the narratives before discussion commences young people are characterized as a distinct cultural group in this study. Community member descriptions will be provided later in the chapter.

Young People

Following the description of participants in the procedures sub-section of chapter two, young people¹ (a) lived and participated in the community throughout their youth, (b) graduated from high school after 2000, and (c) presently continue relationships and ties to the community.

They may, or may not currently reside in the town and its surrounding farm places.

Ethnographic interviews with six individuals in their twenties were conducted as part of fieldwork within the community. Of the six participants, five live within or near the community of study.² Alicia lives in one of the nearest metropolitan cities.³ Three of the young adults left to attend four year universities—one at a private university in a larger regional metropolitan city, one at a smaller in-state liberal arts school located in a town immersed in agricultural enterprises, and one at the state’s land-grant university. Two of the interviewees attended in-state community colleges in suburban locations, living away from home for at least some period of time during their education. The final interlocutor stayed in the community following high school graduation to complete an apprenticeship. Of the five interlocutors living within the community of study, four work either in the town itself or in the county. The fifth commutes to work 40 minutes away. Three of the six participants are teachers.

Going: Leaving for College/“Schooling”

The decision to pursue further “schooling” upon high school graduation is the first major, chronological negotiation in young adult discourses and the ultimate reason for leaving initially. At this life juncture young people have the opportunity to participate in the U.S. American cultural narrative surrounding the necessary college education. Following what they perceive as a societal norm implicated by high school graduation all six young people state that they either left for college or seriously thought about leaving. Nicole’s response of “oh yeah” to the question of whether or not she was certain that she would leave for college demonstrates the socialized discourse embedded with “schooling” as a coming of age practice. Recognizing the expectation, Leah expresses her sentiment about leaving the community after high school with the phrase, “And you don’t really have a choice.” Leaving the rural community is such a strong

expectation that Chris describes people questioning his decision to remain. He remembers, “Some people say [*sic*] I was crazy. . . . [They said,] ‘Go to school. You still got a couple more years.’ . . . But that was just a few people.” Despite justifying his own motivations for staying Chris asserts in his interview, “But, I would still definitely recommend going to school. You know? Unless you could do a hands-on [apprenticeship] like what I did.” Disapproval of Chris for not attending college reveals the presence of the normative, necessary college education among young adults and substantiates idea that a college education ensures a secure future.

Member check interviews asked participant to confirm, disconfirm, or extend whether college is an expectation. Four of the five young adult and community member participants (i.e., Alicia, Chris, John, Nicole, and Sandra) agree that college is an expectation. Chris definitively reiterates, “Yes. Absolutely, [young people are expected to go to college].” Alicia varies her semantics, assessing that going to college and likely settling elsewhere is instead “an assumption,” or at least an expectation “that maybe differs from family to family.” Regardless, the cultural narrative of leaving for college is a central consideration that must be negotiated.

For Leah and Dan college was personally an opportunity to have life experiences devoid of the rural community, to escape from the limitations of living in a rural town. Leah supports her earlier statement about not having a choice to stay, attesting, “I mean growing-up I was like, ‘Oh, why can’t we just get away from this place? You know?’” Dan’s discourse further reinforces the appeal of moving elsewhere when he asserts, “Right out of high school. Thought I had to run away for a little bit. See what else is out there.” Yet for both of interlocutors maintaining their connections and sense of belonging to their hometown becomes more important with each later electing to return to the community. The college experience did not live up to their idealized expectations. After admitting her desire to “get away from this place”

while growing-up, Leah immediately makes the comment, “You know? And then you come back.” Dan too tempers his statement, saying:

That was a little dramatic. I wasn’t running away. I just obviously wanted to go to college and find out if that was for me or not. And I didn’t hate it, but I didn’t fall in love with it either. So no, I didn’t really run away. I just thought that I needed to leave for a little bit and have a different experience. But leaving taught me that—how much I did enjoy it back here.

The college experience reminds participants just what they missed about the rural life, yet admittedly not all young adults experience a desire to return to their rural hometown. Although both Leah and Dan’s narratives allude to ambivalence towards life outside the rural community, their initial statements further situate leaving for “schooling” as an opportunity to experience life outside the rural community. “Schooling” is the catalyst for leaving, signaling an opportunity to explore alternative experiences and fulfill personal and cultural expectations.

Going: “Schooling” as Explanation of Absence and Potential for Return

As a normative practice, leaving for college becomes the gateway to leaving indefinitely. Not returning after college graduation becomes an inevitable reality when living in a metropolitan area offers more opportunities for creating a career and alternative life away from the rural locale. Young people interviewed, however, come to understand their own and their peers’ practices of moving away as not necessarily intentional. In other words, like attending college,⁴ individuals do not always have the choice of residence. Young people’s motivation for “going” is not so much understood as escape, but rather as a result of job location and a lack of imagination about how one could live their desired life in the small town. Alicia, the only interlocutor not to have returned, says she always assumed that she would leave. She remains resolved to follow “the norm” of going to college and getting a job “someplace else,” observing:

You just don’t have the job opportunities necessarily. And so when it comes time to find that job you—I mean it’s not a necessity, but a lot of people from our generation are

finding that it's just as easy to move away as it is to stay here to get a job. So it's just part of—it's just kind of become the norm. When you grow up you graduate from high school, you leave and then go to college, and then you're someplace else. And then you come back on holidays and for the picnic.

Lydia: Did you always know that this was the norm?

Alicia: I think so. I don't think it was ever like a plan. Like I don't think I like ever planned on staying here. . . . I always knew what I wanted to do and it never occurred to me to do it here. I mean maybe as a kid, because that's all you know. But as [*sic*] the older I got, it was very [much] like, "That's what was going to happen." I was going to go off to college and was going to [live and work] someplace else.

Young people in the community who stayed or returned recognize the city's appeal for their peers because they too have experienced this appeal. They come to understand their peers' practices of settling in larger cities, likely near where one went to school, as potentially a default trajectory rather than a conscious decision and denial of the small town lifestyle. While concerned about the lack of a young adult population in the community, interlocutors do not understand their "going" peers to deny the possibility of coming back. Chris shares his "wish [that] there was a little bit bigger younger generation," yet realizes that "schooling" leads his peers to follow pursuits and make their lives outside the small town. Referencing me, Chris points to school as a catalyst for leaving, explaining:

You know like you're still in school. And I just think a lot of people are. Schooling and then—There have been numerous ones that have come [*sic*] back. But the ones that haven't you know have settled down with a job, most likely where they went to school. Like [Dave] for instance—He's back and works [nearby].⁵ As where [Alex]—You know I seen him over the weekend and . . . we were talking about if he's ever gonna come back. And he said, "Probably not." [He] likes his job and he likes [his city]. . . . Between schooling and people just following their jobs they really like and that's where they're at.

Like Chris, Nicole realizes the schooling-to-job-to-elsewhere trajectory followed by her peers. Beyond finding a job in another place she suggests that meeting new people from other places while in college impacts a young person's "going" practices. Introducing the element of pride into the discussion Nicole maintains that many of the young adults who leave are still proud of where they are from and do not necessarily want to live away, but rather do not have

agency in the matter. Nicole's commentary challenges the frustrations with rural life that many young people are perceived to experience and further explicates Chris's comment that excuses young adults who leave as simply following an inevitable path because "that's where they're at." "Schooling" both explains and excuses "going" and makes space for the hope that young people are still proud of their hometown even though they do not return to live. Implicating me momentarily, Nicole points out:

You know you go to college now, and you meet somebody from this really different town. And sometimes it just can't be avoided. It's not like they don't want to come back or they wouldn't be proud to come back. It's just they can't help it. You know there's a couple people who just really don't like it. You're never going to avoid that I don't think. But [I] can't blame'em. They come back to visit, so it's okay. Like you, right? [Laughing].

"Schooling" again appears as a central theme for explaining and understanding how people make sense of leaving practices among young people. Chris and Nicole both express how one's status of being "still in school" allows their "going" peer to be understood both as potentially "returning" to the community upon graduation and as a contiguous member of the community despite obtaining jobs and making lives elsewhere, or at least so long as that individual makes return visits. Each of the previous excerpts carefully situate the researcher (me), a fellow young person who shares their hometown and experiences growing-up there, and yet has left the community for "schooling," as someone who is still a member of the community and who may or may not return when finished with college. While both Chris and Nicole explicitly admit that some people do not want to live in the community and/or cannot return, neither informant seems to place the onus of blame on the young person. Narratives from young people underscore the importance of returning to the community in some capacity.

Returning: Intergenerational Interest

The desire for “returning” is echoed in the narratives of the five young people (i.e., Alicia, Dan, Jessica, Leah, and Nicole) who went away for college. As Nicole’s previous narrative recognizes, the fact that people who go away to school “come back to visit, so it’s okay” remains central to understanding “going” practices. Alicia describes how important coming back to see family and participating in community traditions is to her despite currently living elsewhere. As young people who have now returned, Nicole, Jessica, and Leah all discuss making frequent trips home on the weekends and for holiday and summer breaks during college. Dan shares his affinity for knowing that “I could always come home for like a weekend or whatever.” For Alicia, Dan, Jessica, Leah, and Nicole the interest of community members and young people in their lives made them feel cared about when they did come home. Nicole discusses being remembered by younger people when she visited from college, explaining:

Those little kids always look up to you. So that’s so cool when you’d come back and they’d be like, “Oh my gosh Nicole. How are you?” or whatever. They’d get really excited to see you. And you know you are just such a big part of that community that when you come back everybody is still really excited to see you. That’s like the best feeling ever—that people didn’t just forget about you. So you go away and people still know who you are and you know what you’re doing. And they’re still excited to catch up with you. That was the best. And I love it.

Being remembered creates a sense of belonging and a certainty that any young person “returning” would be welcomed back into the community. Nicole later says about the older generations, “They still remember what I’m doing. They still want me to come back.” In her member check Nicole reiterates:

You’re welcomed back with such open arms. I don’t know if I said this the last time, but one of my favorite things was coming back from college and you couldn’t walk like three steps and you would have to stop and have another half hour conversation with the next person that you saw. Everybody cares. Everybody wants to know. It’s important for them to see you again, to know that they haven’t forgotten about them. People stop and

talk and they all have a million questions and it's the same ones over and over again, but it's just nice to know that somebody cares. And that they haven't forgotten about you.

For Jessica and Leah older community members play an important role in fostering a sense of care while also building intergenerational relationships. Jessica characterizes that she likes living in a small town because the older generations in the community foster a sense of “concern” that is reciprocated through “acknowledgement.” Jessica describes the importance of reciprocated interaction with her grandparent's friends, stating:

Just since growing up here and getting to know everyone you kind of have that place in your heart that you want to know how they're doing, like keep up with them. And definitely the older generation. I don't know. With losing both of my grandparents from here—they definitely have a special place in my heart for being my grandparents' friends. They're always concerned and willing to talk. I think that's a really good aspect. Our older generation here respects our young people. And everyone's willing to communicate; we don't snot them off or anything.

While Alicia has not returned to the community to live “always coming back” is important to her. For her, reconnecting with her parents' friends provides additional support and a sense of belonging when she visits. She suggests:

They were my parents' friends, and so you know they were almost like another set of parents . . . So when you come home they ask the same kinds of questions that your parents ask, “So what have you been up to? What have you been doing?”—which is the same thing that they did when I did live here.

Discourses of supportive interactions and “being remembered” augment young people's connection to the place and its people. During my own summer return to the community I noted on several occasions how older community members were pleased to see me and interested in my way of life during my absence. For instance, in my participant observations at one of the town bar and grills I noted that people approached me on several occasions to ask, “Where are you now?” During my observations of the town picnic I was repeatedly told by older members of the community, “It's nice that you came back for the picnic.” Such comments demonstrate, as

Nicole said, “that people didn’t just forget about [me].” They care about my successes outside the community and want to foster a sense of community belonging.

Returning: Family, Friends, and Familiarity as the Comforts of Community

Feeling connected to the community and maintaining a sense of membership nurtures young adults’ desires to return to community, either to live or at least to visit. Among all young people collectivistic motivations underscore the importance of family, familiarity, and the community in their lives. Dan’s comment summarizes young people’s sentiment, affirming, “I like the—just the sense of community. I mean I like being close to family. I think most all [of my] family is close to the same town. . . . I [also] like knowing where everything is.”

Alicia, Leah, and Jessica provide particularly poignant narratives of the role of family in their lives. For Alicia, family is “everything,” or the primary motivation for her visits. If not for her family she would otherwise only return for town traditions such as the annual picnic. Beyond reasons for visiting, Jessica and Leah underscore the importance of family on impacting desires to return to live. When articulating how much they rely on family for support they speak not only of their immediate family, but also of extended family members. Jessica acknowledges that family “plays a big aspect” in her considerations, speculating:

I can’t imagine going and living anywhere without my family. I talked to them every day. . . . I can’t imagine life without talking to my mom, or my dad, or my sister. Even like [talking to] some of my aunts and uncles day by day, or week by week. . . . Family is like a huge role in my life. I’m always going and supporting family events.

Leah’s interview revolves around “family.” At the time of our interview she was personally contemplating the reality that after “returning” she may have to move away from the community and her family if her fiancé was unable to find a job within commuting distance. Leah is adamant throughout her interview that she does not want to leave because her family is so important to her and she does not want to miss out on family events. Leah recognizes her

reliance on her family for support in her statement, “I never thought I would be that girl that was dependent on her family, and I so am.” She willingly admits that living in the community she grew up in is her dream, and she is willing to make sacrifices in income and lifestyle to stay. Leah resolves that if she and her fiancé would have to move they would need to be financially and geographically able to return frequently throughout the year.

While family plays a key role in impacting decisions to return, interlocutors reveal broader consideration of friends and the community in their decisions not to move away from the small town. Although Nicole notes her mother as the reason she did not follow her fleeting aspiration to move away, Nicole also considered her friends when making her decision to return to her hometown. Ultimately the trio of family, friends, and the familiar influence Nicole.

When I ask Nicole if she has “ever thought about moving away from here,” she recounts:

Yeah. I did once. I thought about going to Texas just to experience something different. But at the same time I don’t think I would like it. Well, I guess I just never did. I don’t know. That’s something I’ve tossed around. I just—I don’t want to miss out on all the friends I’ve made here. I have a lot of friends who came back. I guess I thought about it, but it’s never actually something I would act on.

Lydia: How come you wouldn’t act on it?

Nicole: Oh well. My mom is too much of a family girl. She wouldn’t like it at all and I wouldn’t want to be away from my family. And just the people that I know here. I know it’s a good community. Like I said before, I’m really proud of where I’m from.

“Sense of community,” an affinity for the familiar, or knowing everyone and everything develops throughout the young people’s narratives. When asked, Nicole defines her usage of “sense of community” as “where the people that surround you get along and work together and help each other out and support each other.” Dan and Chris highlight the importance of having a supportive community in fostering a sense of belonging and community pride. Dan finds thinking about leaving difficult when “you are just surrounded by people that love you and want

to help you.” Chris says, “When you have a supportive town . . . it just kind of boasts your energy I guess. . . . You need help or whatever, there’s always willing people.”

Discourses of family and community support create a sense of belonging and “comfortability” that is echoed in statements labeling the community as a “safe” and familiar place when juxtaposed with the complexities of city life. Leah calls the town her “safe place,” while Alicia says, “You can always come back. It’s kind of like a safe haven.” Alicia’s interview provides more depth to the discussion of belonging and the importance of family to “returning” practices. Although she does not live in the community, her thick description and emotive consternation in attempting to characterize the meaning of the place, people, and experience of growing up in a small town demonstrates the value of feeling connected indefinitely despite her absence. Alicia begins outlining the meaning of place, asserting:

It’s home home. It’s where my parents live and my family. And so, home.

Lydia: Can you articulate a definition of home?

Alicia: No. [Laughing] Uhm.

Lydia: Cus you use this word a lot. [Laughing.]

Alicia: I do.

Lydia: So, I want to try to understand it a little bit more.

Alicia: I guess. Home in that sense that I mean it here is that it is where my family is. I mean I call my apartment in [the city]⁶ “home” too, but that’s because that’s where I live. This is where, as cheesy as it is, home is where your heart is. This is where my family is. So, I guess home’s definition is family.

Lydia: Family?

Alicia: Definitely.

Alicia defines home based on constructions of family. Her adaptation of the adage “home is where your heart is” (taken with her later articulation that her apartment is not her home) characterizes “home” as a feeling rather than a physical location. Although she lives in the city, her “home” is in the rural community she grew up in. Alicia does not use the terms “belonging” or “sense of community,” yet her narrative ushers forth conclusions about her

continued relationships and desire to return to visit. She talks about “always coming back” throughout her interview. When I ask her to say more about “always coming back” she offers:

It just that no matter where you go—I mean I am only in [the city], which is just an hour away, but you know I may not always be there. But it’s like no matter where you go, no matter what you’ve got going on, no matter how many other things change, this is always a constant. Cus nothing here changes, which isn’t true. But it seems like nothing here ever changes because you know that whole spirit of that community and everybody being together never changes.

The “spirit” of the community “being together never chang[ing]” exemplifies collectivistic notions that young people desire. The presence of family (whether parents, siblings, grandparents, extended relatives, and community members who are understood as family) is the predominant reason for young people to return to the community, both to visit and to live. A “sense of community,” or feeling of belonging, support, comfort, safety, and continuity develops, contributing to young adults’ deep affinity for place. None of the interviewees describe returning for individualistic reasons. All discuss coming back on account of community connections.

Staying: Non-Aspirations to Leave

Collective motivations for returning contribute to aspiration to stay in the community; the lure of family, friends, and the familiar incites young people to remain in their hometown. Familiarity with people and the town contributes to a desire to stay connected among all young people interviewed. Nicole asserts that “everything I need is here” extending, “[Friends] are coming back. I want to be around them.” She highlights her reason for “staying,” affirming:

I know their background information. . . . I like being about people that I know and that I can talk to. . . . Kind of like moving to Texas; I’d have to start over. And I mean I’m fine with that. I love getting to know people and everything. But I just like my community better. [Laughing]. Cus I know that people better.

The non-aspiration to leave also lies in shared responsibility and pride. While many of the interlocutors speak in more emotive and self-reflective narratives, Nicole, at times, expresses decisive resolve about staying. Nicole provides a rather defiant example of why she stays that expresses not only her affinity for the small town lifestyle, but a profound commitment to the future of community. Nicole remarks, “And how are we supposed to keep a strong community when all the young people keep leaving? So I’d never leave.” When asked at the end of the interview if there was anything else she would like to share about life in a small town, Nicole is sure to reiterate her commitment, saying, “Proud of it. Love it! And I’d never leave it. Ha!” Nicole’s commitment is clear, yet not solitary. Desires to stay in the community are expressed by Chris, Leah, Dan, and Jessica as they too commit themselves to staying in the community. Each expresses hopes and dreams for their future in the small town. Among the four who returned, their aspirations for community life reflect their reasons for coming back.

Staying: Future Visioning and Safety

Young people who opt to stay (after returning) are reflective about how and why they hope to make their lives in their hometown; young people’s narratives of resolve reiterate collectivistic considerations. Two key narratives emerge in young people’s visions of their futures: (1) a hope to raise a family one day in the safe small town, and (2) a desire to make their career in the community. Following these themes, their dedication to the rural small town lifestyle is so deeply rooted and understood that Chris, Dan, and Leah reveal underlying fears and doubts about their futures and their abilities to achieve their dreams.

Chris relays his attitude about raising a family and aspiring to live a similar way of life as his parents, saying, “I’ve never done it. I hope I do do it someday, but raising kids. I just think it’s a much better way of life to raise—or it would be—just my thought.” He continues to

contrast life in the city by contradicting the belief that there is nothing to do in a small town, asserting, “[Children] just get that city life; you know most of the times they’re just going to end up playing video games. There’s just nothing to do.” For Chris the importance of a work ethic and valuing the way of life he learned growing up in the rural community are articulated in his statement:

Whereas out here, I mean most of us who are out here are involved in farming. And there’s a million things to do each day if you’re involved in farming or living on a farm. . . . I just think it’s a really good way of life as far as raising children. And even when like our parents—It’s just a good way of life and they’re happy and it’s like peaceful.

Jessica affirms Chris’s statements about work ethic when she says:

[T]he farm kids . . . know how to work. . . . People will be like, “Oh, you must be from a small town and maybe even lived on a farm,” because [our] work ethic is a little bit more [*sic*] better.

Work ethic and way of life contribute to Chris’s aspiration for raising a family. His hope is paralleled in interviews with other young people who express concern for the safety of their future children, what sort of values children would be raised with, and the types of experiences or people that might encounter living in the city. Dan finds “some kind of insurance raising a family in a small town” because “you just feel safe.” He goes on to assert:

There’s good people and there’s bad people everywhere, but you seem to think that they’re more good intentions around the small town. I’m not saying that there’s all bad people in big cities. . . . It’s just that you have a little bit more insurance [here].

Safety and having children socialized with the similar growing-up experiences to their own is important to informants. Leah hopes that “my kids can be outside and I don’t have to be outside with them [because] they’re safe.” Alicia, who expresses no intentions to return to the community to live throughout her interview, admits that she could possibly return to raise a family “so my kids would have the same kind of growing up experience in a smaller, safer community,” yet proclaims, “I would still work in the city.” “Safety” underscores both an

emotional sense of comfort in the community as well as a material/physical sense of security. Five of the six young people discuss perceptions of safety in relation to knowing one's neighbors. Dan asserts, "You can trust people. Or you always think you can trust people. You're not constantly looking over your shoulder thinking somebody's going to do you wrong. Like compared [to] the big city—you know there's just more people." Throughout interviews all interlocutors make marked contrasts to their perceptions of the city lifestyle. In her member check Nicole characterizes the many "type[s] of big cit[ies]" she had visited concluding that the city is "just too—everywhere. High paced. Too many crabby people. I like to feel comfortable and when I'm around people I don't know I'm not as comfortable as I am when I'm around people I do know." Chris confirms in his follow-up interview, "I respect . . . the city life and all, but it just wouldn't be for me. [Here] there's no traffic, whereas there it's like DRIVE as hard as you can. You get somewhere and it's like people everywhere." Such stories about the pace of life in the city contribute to future visioning by young people who wish to maintain the rural community lifestyles. Detailed commentaries further speak to Leah and Alicia's earlier comments about "my safe place," "home home," and "safe haven" in so far as young people find comfort and security in the community. Characterizing the community as "safe" and "peaceful" motivates young people's practices of "staying" and "returning." Narratives about community safety and peacefulness gesture towards collectivistic notations within the community; people care about and watch out for each other. In addition to raising a family, career aspiration and overarching contrasts in lifestyle prompt many young people to return instead of "going."

One might argue that personal career aspirations and the act of going away to college is an individualistic notion. However, for the young people who have opted to return and stay, career aspirations reflect a desire to contribute to the community and carry on the small town

way of life that was model to them by older generations. Nicole describes an altruistic motivation to teach as a means of supporting future generations and giving back to the community that supported her in her youth. Leah mentions the importance of her own teachers as mentors in her life as she tells me about how honored she is to teach in the same school she attended, which was her childhood dream. The same collectivistic notion surfaces in discourse when Chris and Dan narrate what this community means to them and why they want to stay. Working in other jobs to save money in hopes of one day being able to farm full-time, both Chris and Dan describe a deep desire to continue their family's farms that have been passed down through the generations. While Dan articulates school as his primary motivation for leaving, he attributes his desire to farm as his reason for "returning," saying:

I came back just because I wanted to be closer to the farm and everything and get back to a small town. . . . I didn't really know what to pursue in my education. I don't hate school. I didn't love it. What I really loved was the farm. And for me to get into that I needed to be, obviously, on the farm, [or at least] closer to it.

Dan goes on to consider that while he could study agriculture at school his dad's "years of experience seems more useful to learn." Chris shares the same aspiration and passion to be on the family farm and learn from his father who learned farming from his father. He discusses his love of farming as such:

You know I never left here. I didn't go to school, so since high school I've been here. And what I really love to do is farm. And that's what I'd like to do. And my grandpa farmed around here, around [this] area. My dad does [now]. And it just means a lot to me. You know? Because I'm really into it and I—It's kind of scary now days with the farming. But I just really hope it works out, you know?

Chris's final statements reveal doubts and fears shared by other young people. Chris, Leah, and Dan are all realistic that there is a possibility that they may have to leave and share concern that they may not be able to live out their dreams. Despite a deep desire to farm Dan questions whether or not he should move away again, pondering:

Like I mean it's a hard thing for somebody to just start farming. . . . It has crossed my mind to go back to school to get a higher paying job so that I could make money and then try to farm later in life.

For Chris the uncertainty comes in not having a college diploma. He acknowledges his fear, saying:

But the bad thing about it for me is that you know if I was to quit there and move to the city and I was gonna get a job, I still wouldn't have a diploma saying that I went to college. You know? Cus you know they want to see that you studied more into the mathematics and the social skills, but I haven't had to do that yet.

Leah admits her fears when she says, “[I]t would be really hard to leave here just because that was my dream—to raise my kids here.” For Leah uncertainty also lies in the potential that her fiancé’s job might take them away. Like Nicole earlier suggested, young people may leave because they meet someone from another community, and Leah may have to leave her dreams behind for her fiancé. Because her connections to the community are deep, Leah struggles with the possibility of leaving, reflecting:

I always say that no matter wherever we move or wherever we go, I'm always going to [identify as a member of this community first]⁷. . . . When I went to college I was going to go to college and come back and teach at the school that I went to and was going to live in the town and raise my kids here in the town I grew up in.

As the interview progresses Leah offers the definitive resolve that she would return to visit often in the event that she could not stay. She declares, “I mean there’s no doubt about it that we would be back Christmas, Thanksgiving, [and] my nieces’ birthdays.” Leah’s pledge to return suggests the value of collectivistic community traditions, familial rituals, and the meaning young people attach to those experiences. She further resolves, “[This town] still runs deep in everybody’s blood. You know? I don’t know if it’s the same out there. I guess we’ll find out if we move. I don’t want to.” All five who stayed and returned express collectivistic notions motivating their decisions to remain. Specifically, Dan offers an altruistic and thoughtful

questioning of the life he wants to lead. Early on Dan succinctly states, “So really, I came back [1] to pursue an agricultural career, and [2] family, and probably [3] small town atmosphere.”

Now he ruminates on his choice and devolves:

Basically, it just means a lot to me knowing this is how I’m choosing to spend my life. You know I only have the one, as far as we know. That’s basically what I’m trying to answer I guess. I hope it’s the right choice.

Lydia: What makes you question whether it’s the right choice?

Dan: Just not knowing I guess. Not knowing what I would have been or what I would have done. If I would have made a bigger impact on other people’s lives if I would have not stayed here I guess. I’m not—I’m not—How would I say it? I’m confident that I will have a good life here. And I’m not sure that I would have had a good life in a city.

Lydia: Because the place is more—?

Dan: Just for my goals. I think I would be more successful here [for] the goals that I have now. I’m not saying I’ll never change my mind, but I’m pretty firm in believing that I’ve made the right choice in staying, or coming back.

Dan’s search for words to describe the meaning of the community and his decision to make his life in the community characterizes the deep aspirations of young people to continue the traditions and way of life they are familiar with from their childhoods in this town. They see their futures as contributing to the community and they understand the community as part their individual futures. All of the young people interviewed share a deep affinity for the people and events that are part of the community’s history. The beliefs, values, and attitudes that they were socialized with continue with them when they leave and often motivate them to stay or return after graduation. Moreover, their connections to family and community members offer them a sense of belonging. They know that unconditional support is available at “home.” Their practices of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” are then negotiated through collective aspirations to visit and to give back to the community that supported and encouraged them.

Community Members

Young people’s voices offer unique perspectives and immense research materials on practices of “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” Their narratives carefully situate the role of

family and community members in young people's decisions to stay, leave and/or return. As rural communities continue to lose population, the reality is that "staying," "going," and "returning" impact the community's future and the people who have and continue to support the young people. Understanding the perspective of the older generations who have invested their past, present, and future in the community provide other important voices to consider.

Community members represent individuals over the age of 30 who reside and participate in community life. Community members are parents, grandparents, and other adults who have lived in the community of study for much of their adult lives with potential absences. Five ethnographic interviews were conducted with long-term residents of the community—four women and one man. Four of the interlocutors were born and raised in the community; the fifth participant moved to the community when she was married some thirty odd years prior. Of the four natives, two indicated that they left the community following high school graduation and two would label themselves "lifers." However, one of these "lifers" later revealed in passing that she had left the community for an extended period (i.e., at least one year) in early adulthood. Of the two who left for college after high school, one returned after a year while the other settled in the city for over fifteen years before moving back. All five of the participants have children who are predominantly finished with higher education and live away, primarily in cities. With the exception of one child who is still in high school, no one's children, or grandchildren in three instances, live in the community. Four of the five interlocutors commute to work outside the community, two of them to the nearest metropolitan city.

Going: Not Close, Geographically and Relationally

Community members focus less on "schooling." Rather, community members contrast the lives of their children in cities to their own lives in the rural locale. They talk both about

their children's lives being different from their own and how they miss their children who live farther away. Rita ruminates on her perception of her daughter's way of life in the city as Rita struggles to reconcile that her daughter does not know her neighbors. Rita makes her point, saying, "They're in a nice community, but they really don't know their neighbors. . . . It's sad." She continues Rita considers herself "lucky" to live in a small town where people support and care about each other and finds it "sad" that her daughter and family no longer have this same experience of friendliness and familiarity.

The contrast to the city life is also brought up in the way the community members talk about missing their children and grandchildren who live at a distance. Kate discusses this challenge and its implications on her relationships with her daughter and grandchildren, saying:

You know now I have a daughter that's in [a more distance state] and I miss her. If we see each other four, five, six times a year that's a lot. And she has three children and it's hard to be away from them. . . . You can even tell the difference in our conversations because you know we try to talk twice a week, but there's so many tasks to get to in those conversations because we don't see each other as often that we don't have that same kind of close relationship as the girls that live close. . . . [The other girls] will just pop in for a couple of hours or that kind of thing.

Not seeing children and grandchildren frequently is difficult for interlocutors. Kate's narrative begins to reveal the importance of younger generations⁸ making return visits in order to maintain relationships, echoing what young people discuss in their interviews about coming back. Rita gives further credence to this practice in her interview as she describes how jobs take younger generations away. Although it is difficult to have her family not working in jobs that allow them to live in or near the community, they reside at reasonable distances for visiting. Rita looks forward to holidays and other time when her children return to visit as well as opportunities to go visit her children in their current hometowns. She expounds:

That's the sad part. . . . We had three kids and they're not around. . . . They have to go out further to find jobs, . . . [but] we're fortunate [that they are all within a few hours]. . . .

[Yet] it is sad that they have to go so far out and then you don't see them. It all works out I guess.

Lydia: Do you kids try to come back?

Rita: Oh yeah. When they can. . . . Yeah, that's fun. We love it on Christmas and Easter when you see them come [home].

Parents admit that they know it is difficult for their children to return due to their careers and responsibilities elsewhere. Sandra recognizes the challenges when she talks about wanting her children to “have a life” and have time to connect with friends when they return, contending:

They come back when they can. They've all got careers. Getting away is not easy. And they have ties with certain friends they keep in touch with you know. And sometimes they don't get to see them as often as they'd like to. I wish my kids could get home more. We end up going [there] just because responsibilities and commitments and you know. And my kids aren't all married, so that makes a little bit of a difference too. You know? You can understand that being a single person. You know? It's nice to come home and see Mom and Dad, but you want a life. And, I think as a parent you want your kids to have a life too. But they still like that small town atmosphere.

Sandra admits that she and her husband, Jack, go visit their children because it is easier, yet she notes that even if her children no longer live close by they still make an effort to visit, an effort grounded in the assertion that her children still have an affinity for the small town where they grew up. In her member check Sandra accentuates, “It's your roots, where you were born, raised. There's a part of you—even though you're away—part of you is still there. I think as long as you have some close family ties, it's still there.”

Returning: Visiting

Staying connected to younger generations, even when these individuals live away from the community, remains of the utmost importance to community members. Shared community events, such as the annual picnic and those celebrations that occur at holidays, are important times for bringing young people home to visit. For Valerie, the “number one [function of the picnic is to] bring alumni and other relatives home that don't live here so you get a chance to see those people.” Rita provides another extended narrative about the concern of the community and

their happiness when young people come back to visit at Christmas time. While she talks about her own family, she also speaks directly to me, saying:

Like you. You're away and you come back. People are really excited to see you young people come back. That's just like at Christmas time the church is full when their families come back. . . . Take like my family. We babysat with the little kids and our three kids and their spouses and the older kids went to church. And it's like Catherine [a community member] said, "Oh, it's good to see them. Boy their kids are growing." See we're really interested in the ones who used to live here when they come back. Just to see how they grew up and their kids [too].

Lydia: Why do you think we like to see young people who've moved away come back?

Rita: Well, because we can see how they grew and they're prettier all the time.

[Laughing].

Lydia: And so you get to know—?

Rita: —their families more and what they're doing now. So, it rolls to a bigger, bigger family. . . . We're just fortunate to live out in the country, in a small town and be there for them.

Rita uses a family metaphor, which I will return to in the second analysis chapter, to describe the community's interest and involvement in the younger generations who have moved away but continue to return. The community is still concerned about these individuals and their own young families. In my summer field observations community members were not only interested in my life outside of the community, but about updating each other on the lives of their children who are at a distance. For instance, in my notes from the town bloodmobile many of the donors who had already donated sat at the table talking about when their children were coming to visit this summer and what their grandchildren had done to help the older generation out when they visited. During the bloodmobile observations I was repeatedly approached and commended for participating in the community and updated on what my peers were doing by their parents and grandparents.

While talking about and updating others on one's family could generally be considered a typical topic of conversation in everyday life, community members seek to also re-involve younger generations in the community when they return. Such acts assert pride and belonging in

the community. As a young person I was called on at numerous moments by community members to volunteer or help out, (often when attempting to conduct field observations). In a specific instance, during set-up for the picnic I was called on by name by two older men in the community who needed my assistance putting up a snow fence. In another instance, after attending Thursday morning mass for consecutive weeks I received a phone call at my parents' home asking if I would be a lector "because you're in the business [meaning my academic job teaching public speaking]." While this interaction was comical in the moment, I obliged for the remaining weeks I was home and again during the Christmas break. I was overwhelmingly commended for my public speaking skills by community members and thanked for volunteering as a young person. Individuals took great pride in my community involvement, also extending laudatory comments to my parents. One individual even left an aside message of praise on my parents' answering machine when calling in regards to another matter. Such moments for me foster a natural sense of belonging and membership in the community that remind me of my past in the community. In these instances I am relationally constructed as a contributing member of the community even though my participation is very much limited to the duration of my return visits from my academic way of life many states away.

Making sense of young people's practices of leaving and coming back involves highlighting the importance of return visits among the younger generations. The importance of visiting is further substantiated in member check interviews. Young people and community members alike agree on the importance of young people coming back to visit, both to live and to visit. In regards to visiting, Sandra says, "And it's like any parent—you want your kids to come back home, even if it's just to visit." These return visits provide opportunities for family and community members to find out about the lives of young people outside the rural community

while continuing to situate them as belonging to the community. While younger generations and their family often do not live close by and are not able to visit frequently, community members still very much look forward to their return. Because younger generations are only able to visit and participate in community infrequently community members make further negotiations to situate their children within their hometown despite absence. Very little discussion of young people “staying” in the community is made beyond passing comments such John’s statement about keeping his family’s century farm in the family saying, “So hopefully one of my children may live here possibly.” I argue that community members talk about “staying” through “going” and “returning” practices. Young people are “staying” in the community by not only “returning,” but by remembering the rural community values of their socialization. Community members’ narratives remain focused on situating children who have left as contiguous and continuous members of the community.

Staying: Keeping Your Values and Not Forgetting From Where You Come

Previously explored community member discourses articulate the importance of younger generations remaining connected to the community. Sandra’s personal reflections, however, give voice to a facet of the small town experience not as deeply explored by other interlocutors. Sandra specifically voices the significance of remembering the small town values of one’s socialization in an elongated narrative (requiring long block quotations to more fully represent the richness of meaning expressed).⁹ The hermeneutical key to understanding Sandra is establishing the moral of her stories in order to interpret the more coherent interwoven discussions of life in a small town.

According to Sandra “a little sense of family and pride” makes the rural community lifestyle valuable. She wanted her children to go to school and have the freedom to do what they

wanted in life, yet realized that in doing so her children would not likely live close. Sandra explains, “I also think it’s part of a parent saying it’s all right to leave. When you tie someone down . . . even though you don’t think you’re doing it, you can do more damage sometimes.

And it’s hard for parents to let go sometimes.” From this point she continues:

[T]o say that my kids aren’t still part of the community. No. They are in their own little way. They’re not here. I think you know where you’re at. You take part of that with you if you are experiencing some good. If they aren’t good you don’t want to take that with you. . . . I think that part of a small town is that you trust each other and you help each other out.

In this brief segment of her narrative, which also situates my identity, Sandra makes three key assertions surrounding young people: (1) the importance of parents letting their children leave the community; (2) the suggestion that her children are still a part of the community; and (3) how the value of trusting others is constructed when young people have positive experiences. She synthesizes each one of these key ideas in her assertion that remembering family and maintaining connections to the community regardless of geographical distance is of the upmost importance. Sandra proceeds from discussing trust to her earlier point about allowing children to leave as she now makes the case for higher education, saying:

Part of me wishes that they were close [by]. But I’ve always wanted and I’ve always told my kids that you can do anything you get your mind to. And I think that education was very big with me. In my side of the family it’s very big. And Jack agrees with me on education. I wish they were closer, but I want them to be happy. And I guess maybe the big thing there is that I don’t care if you’re in Timbuktu if you still remember that you have a brother and a sister. And you give them that space, but you still talk and communicate and respect each. And so far I think that my kids have done that good. They’re there to help each other. And they don’t put a dollar [and] cents to this one, that one. . . . I think they’re good. And that family means something. . . . I think you don’t necessarily have to be close [geographically].

Sandra describes her desire for her children to have “that tie even though my kids are further away,” making a key assertion about remembering your family with her “Timbuktu”

comment. She continues by returning to her discussion of aspirations, resolving that her children still care about the community:

I don't think they have to farm to do [that]. I want them to do what they want to do. And it's not like years ago. I mean we have communications now. I mean I can see my daughter on the computer, [and my] granddaughter. So it isn't like years ago where you don't [have the means of communication]. Sometimes that's an advantage and a disadvantage because the kids live away. You still have that sense of belonging and the kids still enjoy hearing about people that they knew or if someone passed away.

In addition to a sense of family, one's memories and commitment to upholding the small town values they were raised with remains important. Earlier in Sandra's interview she speaks to how children are socialized to care about others in the rural community, asserting:

I wouldn't say that you're really born with it, but you are a little bit to that point that it comes down through your ancestry. Plus your parents. It's something that's taught. If you teach a young child to say "please" and "thank you" they learn that's a good response because it makes someone feel good, plus it makes them feel good. . . . It's kind of that engrained. It's that you care to help somebody.

Sandra proceeds from her commentary asserting that her "kids still enjoy hearing about people" to discuss that she and Jack go to visit their kids who are busy with careers. She then resolves that her children should "have a life" before giving an anecdote about her daughter finding commonality with other professionals who grew-up in small towns. This narrative incites Sandra to articulate the credence of personal memories. That is, young people who leave continue to remain connected with the community and their pasts through shared memories. Hopefully, these memories cause young people to return, whether through honoring values or coming back to visit. Sandra's discourse attests to the untenable bonds:

You might be farther away but it still brings you back if you have good memories. I don't care how far away, you still—part of you is left here.

Lydia: What does that mean—part of you is left here?

Sandra: Memories. It's a bond I guess you carry with you. It's probably something kind of engrained in you. It's part of who you are. How you got up. Your experiences and stuff . . . It could be good and it could be bad. Hopefully it's more good than bad.

Sandra shares another anecdote to reinforce her points. All of Sandra and Jack's children hold advanced degrees and have successful professional lives in larger metropolitan cities. Following the earlier story involving her daughter, a then intern connecting with a senior associate over memories of growing up in small town, Sandra tells an extended story about her son who was approached by a stranger for money to get on the transit train on his walk home from work in the downtown of a major U.S. city. The man had lost his wallet. Sandra said that she was proud of her son for caring and not having any attachment to paying the man's transit fare. Sandra's narratives offer further insights into how the practices of young people "going" and "returning" are negotiated. With so many children of community members having left the rural area, I argue community members negotiate "staying" by constructing narratives that situate the younger generation as "staying" in the community in their heart. These narratives are demonstrated in two performances: first, by maintaining the values they were raised with as children, and, second, by practices of asking about and making visits home. Despite leading a life different from the small town, "memories" and remembering one's history show affinity for place and its practices.

Leaving: Shifting Participation, Values, and Imagination

Despite discourses that situate younger generations who have left the community as still connected, the pragmatic reality remains that these individuals' involvement in the community is limited to special events and family traditions. In other words, the community has lost many of its youth to larger cities where jobs and material access become more appealing than the lifestyles of their parents and grandparents. Kate is particularly concerned about the declining population in her discussion of "untapped resources" in human capital and knowledge within the community and the need for the community to "market itself." She discusses the importance of

older generations “teach[ing] someone else ‘the business.’” Such comments are pragmatically focused on the viability of the community into the future given the lack of younger people who elect to live in the community. When asked about her ideas for marketing the community Kate agrees that this requires bringing younger people who have left the community back. In her response Kate makes further assertions about why younger generations do not elect to return even if they might like to live in their hometown. Kate offers an interesting observation about the lack of imagination among young people, arguing that fail to perform/adopt a key community value—independent innovation. Kate purports:

I can tell you that Callie and Dean [her daughter and husband who live in the city] would like to live here. It’s jobs. You know they would love to raise their children here. But you have to be able to make a living as well. . . . [T]his is a weird example, but like craft shows never go as well here because people look at it and say, “Oh, I’m going to go home and make it.” Not, “Oh, that’s cute. I’ll buy it.” And I think it’s that same, even on a larger scale. I think it’s that same mindset for independence and stuff. And so I think that these young people don’t have those skills always. I think that that would bring them a higher standard of living in this community. You know if there was a good income to be had and if there were a bit of that “I can do it myself.” “Or if my standard of living is high enough, it could be the same [here] as it is in the city then I could still pay for those services.”

Lydia: So it’s kind of self-sufficiency?

Kate: Really. And I think that that goes back to the work ethic . . . I mean Keith [her husband] will always say, “Show me a picture of it and I’ll make it.” You know, and he did.

In effect, Kate argues that young people, while they might wish to return to the area for the safety and quality of raising their children in the small town, lack the independence and ingenuity to be away from the city and its opportunities. In other words, young people who settle in the city lack the imagination to envision transiting their aspirations and desired way of life to the rural community. Kate argues for ways these younger individuals could make their lives in the smaller town, continue their chosen careers, and maintain a comfortable lifestyle.

Valerie is also concerned about the loss of collectivist values, particularly with fewer of the younger generation staying in the area and participating in weekly rituals of church and breakfast. This weekly ritual, while perhaps banal, to her maintains important relational connections by offering an opportunity for community members to gather and “chit-chat.” (Interestingly, Alicia, the only one to leave, admits that she feels like she misses out on the everyday occurrences because she, for instance, is not around to attend coffee and rolls.) When asked to further characterize her experience of declining support Valerie speculates:

Just because there are fewer and fewer people that live here. And what I’ve seen from people my age and younger is that there are a lot more who don’t go to church. And so then if you don’t see them at weekly church and on to breakfast after and sitting down and chit-chatting, it just seems like those connections start to loosen a little bit. So I think it’s sad. There’s a lot of people that just you know take it or leave it. They just don’t go to church. I think it’s a generational thing. So. I think that’s the biggest thing: fewer people living in small towns.

The lack of participation and the privileging of careers in the city over small town community is underscored in three passing narrative from Sandra, Kate, and Valerie who all admit to a real but passing possibility that they may have to leave the community themselves, particularly as they age. When asked if she has thought about moving Sandra says, “You gotta think that maybe someday. . . I might not be able to take care of myself. . . . Other than that, no. . . [Health] would be that point that would force us.” When asking whether or not at that time she would move closer to family, she states, “It could be yes. It could be no. I mean you never know what the Lord’s going to play in your hands. I figure I’m going to have faith like my mother and say God will take care of that.” Kate argues that “condominium living” for “widowers” and older people is needed so individuals would not have to worry “about scooping snow [and] mowing grass, but would still get to do their small community type things.” As she articulates her concern she reflects:

Do I want to stay here? Yeah, probably. Will I? I don't know. Right now my dad's here and so that's important for me to be close to him. But I've worked in [the neighboring county] for 30 years and would I consider some type of condominium living there? Yeah, I probably would. I like the people. I wouldn't have to drive to work.

When asked if she has ever thought about moving way Valerie responds, "Not seriously. No. . . . [Maybe] as the kids get older and [we see] where they end up, but it's not on the radar screen." With the potential of not having children and family close by each entertains to various degrees the possibility of leaving to live closer to their children and/or resources that would maintain a desired quality of life, but ultimately leaves this question up to faith in the unknown future. At present leaving seems improbable.

Chapter Conclusion

Responding to "How do people in a rural community make sense of young people's (i.e., 18-30 years of age) practices of staying, leaving, and returning to their hometown?" requires a broad, yet careful analysis of interviews with both young people and community members. Interviews with young people reveal that "going" practices catalyze at high school graduation and the decision of whether or not to pursue higher education. Young people further reconcile "going" and "staying" with discussion of the loss of classmates and the realization that not everyone is able to, nor will, stay or return. "Returning" practices among young people hinge on visiting during the time they are away. These visits allow young adults to stay connected to family and continue to foster relationships with community members who take a vested interest in their lives. These visits contribute to informants articulating collectivistic motives for "returning" to live. Community pride and a desire to continue the familiar lifestyle they grew up with in the rural town and surrounding area is central to creating a vision of their future in the community. Family, friends, and familiarity are emphasized in informant discourses and further characterize a "sense of community."

For community members, the central themes of “staying, “going,” and “returning” center on giving children the freedom to leave, yet continuing to construct them as belonging to the community through shared values, memories, and return visits. Community members do not necessarily like how far away their children lived, nor the sort of experiences of city life they incur, yet they acknowledge this inevitable reality and its impacts on relationships. Like the young people interviewed, community members care about and seek to keep up with the younger generation who leave the area and return to visit. These return visits allow the community to see and find out about those “goers” who have left as well as allowing those “goers” to return and participate in community life. Community members argue younger generations continue to be connected to through socialized community values that their children take with them and maintain throughout their lives elsewhere. The inability to enact shared community values, however, is also used to explain how some young people are unable to return because they could not envision their lives outside the comforts of more metropolitan areas. Just as interlocutors admit that their children are busy, and, at times they must go to visit them, some community members reveal that to they could potentially move to be closer to family.

In the next chapter I take up the second research question guiding this community study as I seek to name the localized taxonomy of terms used to describe “staying,” “going,” and “returning,” from the point of view of all interlocutors.

Endnotes

¹ The terms “young people” and “young adult” are used synonymously to refer to the same interlocutor group. However, I favor “young people” because it is the descriptor used in RQ1, the characterization of participants in chapter two, and the language used in my IRB protocol.

² As a reminder, the terms “interlocutor,” “interviewee,” “participant,” and “informant” are used synonymously.

³ To maintain the privacy of volunteer and consenting informants a pseudonym has been assigned by the researcher.

⁴ “College” is appropriated in the broadest sense and includes 4-year universities, community colleges, trade schools, internships, and other avenues of career training.

⁵ For the purposes of maintaining community privacy and confidentiality interlocutors’ references to identifiable locations have been removed. Additionally, the names of any individuals mentioned have been replaced with researcher assigned pseudonym. Changes to interlocutors’ discourse are noted with the use of brackets to signal research addition and/or edits.

⁶ The use of “the city” in bracket is appropriated from interlocutor’s interviews when they contrast lifestyles, electing not to name specific cities. Hence, “[the city]” is adopted to replace references to specific geographic locations that might out the community of study or led to further speculation. That said, at times “the city” specifically designates the nearest metropolitan city to the community of study.

⁷ Leah uses the community’s name to create a term comparable to the terms New Yorker, Coloradoan, or Philadelphian to label her identity. The original interview transcript read, “I’m always going to be a [community name].” While the likely researcher edit would be, “I’m always going to be a [member of this community],” the impact of her sentiment and labeling is minimized. In order to maintain community privacy while also easing the poetic, Leah’s discourse was bracketed to remain more consistent to her intended meaning rather than actual wording.

⁸ The term “younger generation” is used when community members discuss their children because in instances their children are older than our research specifications of “young people” as currently 18-30 years of age.

⁹ Sandra speaks primarily in anecdotes drawn from her own life experience, often moving on to another story to illustrate her point before resolving the previous narratives. Underscoring what can be read and heard as disconnected ideas and narratives when reviewed holistically reveal overarching morals to her stories and reflections on life.

Chapter Four

Interlocutors' voices provide consistent narratives discussing how young people and community members come to understand practices of "staying," "going" and "returning" among younger generations. These narratives situate "staying," "going," and "returning" practices within a collectivistic orientation towards community and family commitments as well as demonstrating a sense of familiarity and "comfortability" with life in the rural community. Each interlocutor provides thoughtful articulations of what they like and do not like about the small town life, how they remain connected to the community, and why they are committed to that lifestyle. Narratives of the community's meaning in each interlocutor's life further reveals localized ways of speaking about young peoples' transitions. Augmenting research question one addressed in the previous chapter, the second research question, the subject of this chapter, asks:

RQ 2: What are the localized taxonomy of terms (Hymes, 1974) used by participants to describe the phenomenon of "staying," "going," and "returning"?

The terms "staying," "going," and "returning" are researcher appropriated terms for naming and describing rural youth migration and transition practices. While interlocutors did not offer localized terms to directly replace "staying," "going," and "returning," they suggest three uniquely situated taxonomies to characterize young people's connections to the small town and their motivations for remaining in and/or leaving the rural community: "you come back," "it's (like) a family," and "everybody knows everybody." In this chapter nuanced perspectives on youth migration and transition practices are explored through participants' conventions of these three localized taxonomies.

By "localized taxonomy of terms" I mean searching for terms that continue to organize and assign meaning to "staying," "going," and "returning" practices as interlocutors situate such practices within their own narratives. The three taxonomies explored in this chapter emerged in

interlocutors' responses to ethnographic interview questions more broadly thematized around describing their way of life in a small town rather than youth migration patterns (see Appendix C: Interview Protocol). By asking participants about their history, relationships, likes and dislikes, and important places and events taxonomies develop conversationally throughout the entire interview, rather than in response to particular questions. Because taxonomies assigning meaning to the ethnographer named moments of "staying," "going," and "returning" converge among young people and community members the voices of each group are interwoven in representative narrations contributing to a cohesive whole of 11 interlocutors instead of construed as six young people and five community members. Ultimately, the delineation among voices resides within the "going" perspective. This voice diverges in experience and orientations towards tensions of community closeness, which is otherwise dialectically evaluated positively by interviewees who remain, or left and returned.

"You come back."

Consistent the with broad motivations for "returning" among young people described in chapter three, interlocutors express the necessity to return to the community, either to visit or to live. Discourses label this returning practice to "come back." The phrase "you come back" references both returning for short-term stints during college and long-term re-settlement in the community following college graduation. The maxim "come back" appears in 10 of the 11 interviews. The frequency of usage demonstrates the importance of "coming back" as a cultural practice providing for continued commitment to the community. Among interviewees "returning" practices are governed by a sense of familiarity and constancy. "You come back" because you, as a young person, miss your hometown and the people you know so well. Young people and community members alike discuss both aspects of the "coming back" process, the

visit from the “Leaver” (i.e., a person who has left for a given reason) and the act of moving home among “Returners” (i.e., a person who ultimately returns after making a life elsewhere), with both practices following the transition to college as an important small town cultural event (see Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

“Coming back” is necessary among young people to reinforce a sense of belonging and to provide continuity of experience amidst transition. Alicia, who lives in a nearby metropolitan city to her hometown, takes comfort in the “coming back” practice knowing, “It’s just that you can always come back kind of thing, even if it’s just for a short one night kind of thing. You can just always come back.” She further discusses how continuity and a lack of change creates “a safe haven.” Alicia extends in her narrative that amidst transition and the unfamiliarity of experience away from the community “coming back” can be understood as a resistance to change and a means for maintaining close relationships through continued presence “even if it’s just for a short one night kind of thing.” She states:

[I]t’s like no matter where you go, no matter what you’ve got going on, no matter how many other things change, this is always a constant. Cus nothing here changes, which isn’t true, but it seems like nothing here ever changes because you know that whole spirit of that community and everybody being together never changes. . . . I mean things change obviously, but the community sense definitely never changes.

For Alicia “returning” home allows her to experience the familiar, or a certain sense of community that she does not find elsewhere and that continues to exist unchanged from what she experienced growing-up in the community. Alicia recognizes that “no matter where [she] go[es]” she can always retreat to “home home.” To “come back” as a “returning” practice continues to situate young people in the community and perpetuates a sense of belonging that young people desire to participate in when they return.

Motivations to “come back” are illuminated through instances of homecoming, reflected in the encompassing discussions of “returning” themes in chapter three. As an example of homecoming practices during her leave from the community, Nicole narrates the importance and joy of “coming back” to visit from college, confirming, “When you come back that’s always the best I think. Everybody’s like, ‘Oh how are you?’ And you’re just like welcomed back into the community.” Similar to Alicia, who takes comfort in knowing she has the ability to make even a short visit when necessary, Nicole adds that the relative distance of her college to her home made it “so easy to come back when I needed to.” Nicole uses “to come back” to characterize young people’s needed return in order to stay connected to family and the community, reiterating that being “welcomed back” from college was “the best.” Alicia and Nicole’s voices recognize the necessity that “you come back” as college students/graduates, both as young people who miss home and in order to continue relationships to the community.

To “come back” becomes a normative practice and expectation among younger generations who leave. The expectation exists both among young people and community members and is often tied to family and shared rituals. When discussing the norm to leave for college Alicia resolves, “When you grow up you graduate from high school you leave and then you go to college, and then you’re someplace else. And then you come back on holidays and for the picnic.” In this iteration Alicia constructs a narrative that connects “going” practices to “returning” performances highly connected to continued participation in family and community life. Just as one is assumed to leave for college and beyond, young people are expected to return to participate in familiar community traditions. Alicia asserts that “there would [not] be a whole lot of reason to come back” if she did not have family in the community that kept her connected and wanting to return, or that is, “other than [for] something like the picnic, which is tradition.”

In other words, people who reside in the community continue to bring young people back to visit. “Coming back” for community events also offers some certainty that others who have moved away will return for the same shared traditions. As another example of “returning” for special events, in participant observations I describe an informal tradition of young people gathering the night before Thanksgiving at local bars as “one giant class reunion.” Such a tradition situates “returning” practices within a shared understanding that “you [need to] come back” in order to maintain supportive and familiar community relationships.

Community members express the importance of “coming back” practices as it relates to young people who have left, particularly in relation to participation in traditions. Rita talks about younger generations who “come back” for holidays within her discussion of enjoying seeing young people, and Sandra adds that her kids “come home when they can.” Commentaries reflect a recognition that while younger generations have lives outside the community many continue to commit to “coming back.” Community members look forward to the opportunity to see and talk to those who have moved away, particularly when younger generations can be assumed to “come back” to participate in ritualized events. John says, “So you know the events like that [i.e., the picnic and church events among others] are really [important]—kept [*sic*] the small town going each year and bringing people back to it. They come back to visit it.” Broadly, knowledge of and commitment to community events maintains hope that people who reside elsewhere will “come back” to reconnect. In other words, young people’s remembrance of and return to their hometown expresses a commitment to the small town’s future.

The taxonomy to “come back” describes not only the expectation that young people will “come back to visit,” but the hope that some young people will come back to live. Resembling Alicia’s “safe haven” characterization and her resolve to leave for college, Leah finds her “safe

place” in the community and also grew up intending to attend college, yet had knowledge that young people needed to “come back.” Leah, however, had the intention to “come back” to live.

She shares that her “dream” had always been to return to the community when she asserts:

When I went to college I was going to go to college and come back and teach at the school that I went to and was going to live in the town and raise my kids here in the town I grew up in. . . . [This] is my safe place.

Leah contends that more young people are returning as a result of “safety and comfort” as well as the current economic climate. Her assertion cannot be validated other than by her own colloquial observation, yet considering that Leah herself moved back suggests that young people are “returning” to their hometown. Regardless, young people point out the perceived safety of life in a small town as a reason to “come back” to live. The security of the community is augmented by the supportive interest of community members in young people’s lives. While the rural community encourages its youth to leave for higher education, they hope young people will feel that they can “come back.” For instance, Nicole maintains that the community “still want[s] me to come back.” With the support of her community Nicole reiterates throughout her interview that “I’m really proud of where I’m from.” This combination of pride and care arguably contributes to more young people coming back, both to visit and reside. Although not quantifiable, Jessica, like Nicole and Leah, asserts, “We’re having a lot of younger people coming back [and] staying. . . . There was a period of time when there were not younger kids coming back. They were all moving away.” “Younger people coming back” then signals the vitality and future of the community.

“Coming back” signals a complex negotiation among young people and the small town community way of life. The negotiation of tensions appears in young peoples’ narratives regarding “coming back,” or “returning,” as well as in their understandings of “going” practices

among both themselves and their peers. Although Leah purports a longstanding desire to settle in the community, she also admits:

I mean growing-up I was like, “Oh, why can’t we just get away from this place?” You know? And then you come back. So, I mean a majority of my class—out of the 20 kids I graduated [elementary and junior high] Catholic schools with, I mean I bet you 15 are back. You know? We all said we would never come back here. And you leave and you realize the grass isn’t greener on the other side.

In this excerpt Leah situates herself with those young people who have returned to the community, yet admits that at one time she was someone who purported to move away permanently. Leah, like other young people, recognizes that some young people do leave and do not come back. For some young people “the grass [is] greener on the other side.” Chris’s narrative provides a brief realization that not all young people will “come back” when he talks about his recent conversation with Alex, a classmate visiting for the holidays. Chris reports, “As where [Alex]—you know I seen him over the weekend and he’s—and we were talking about if he’s ever gonna come back and he said probably not. [He] likes his job and he likes [the city].” To “come back” signifies a commitment to place that some young people do not affirm to the same degree as their peers.

For Nicole, “coming back” to live is made easy when her friends are also coming back, yet she realizes that not everyone comes back to live or even to visit. Nicole concedes of peers who do not “come back” to live, “It’s not like they don’t want to come back or they wouldn’t be proud to come back [to the community to stay]. . . . They come back to visit, so it’s ok. Like you, right?” Arguably, if young people elect not to “come back” to live, the fact that “they come back to visit” demonstrates a continued commitment to contribute to the community and remain connected. Nicole delineates in her narrative that how often young people “come back” impacts whether or not they are still considered part of the community. To “come back” is part of

Nicole's personal negotiation of situating her peers as members of the community when they did not elect to move home after graduation. Practically, in this somewhat enigmatic characterization of how young people's community membership is bounded, Nicole attempts to situate me as her peer and as someone who is "out right now" but makes an effort to "come back to visit" as, or at least arbitrarily and contiguously, a member of the community.

The importance of "you come back" is further substantiated in all five member check interviews as interlocutors confirm the importance of "returning" practices. Alicia speaks from her own experience of being away and how she looks forward to going home, noting:

I mean I live in a big city now and everybody's so disconnected. Even if you're 10 minutes from each other you still don't see each other that often. But you go home and everybody comes back and you get to see everybody and talk to everybody and catch up on everything you already know, but get to hear the details.

Nicole articulates the two reasons for returning, the pragmatic future of the community and the emotional/social need to maintain belonging when she responds, "I would absolutely agree with that. I mean if people don't come back those communities will eventually fade away. Coming back—it's like your family—so everybody sees you again." Chris echoes his contemporaries, predicating:

Absolutely. I think it is important. Like it goes back to your first question, everybody knows everyone. Unless there's a conflict between them, it's always great to see those people that went away. To hear what they're doing, what they've seen, [and] know. It's just interesting. Like you for example. When you talk about Colorado. It's fun to hear that stuff.

Of interest to note in preceding member check narratives is that Nicole and Chris both appropriate the two other forthcoming taxonomies discussed in this chapter. While Chris and I had previously been discussing "everybody knows everybody," Nicole uses "it's like your family" before I had even been able to ask if familial descriptors characterize her experience of community life. Discursive constructions in member check interviews only further situate the

importance of community relationships in imparting shared values and influencing “staying,” “going,” and “returning” practices. To “come back” represents a localized taxonomy for describing “returning” practices among young people. The importance of continuing relationships, community traditions, and experiences of continuity with the familiar characterize “coming back” practices. In the end, to “come back” to visit or to live demonstrates a commitment to remaining connected to the community and an acknowledgement of a young person’s past, present, and future relationships.

“It’s (like) a family.”

Family continues to be a point of discussion throughout all 11 interviews, appearing almost immediately in response to questions about what interlocutors like about living in their rural town. Family specifically appears in narratives illustrating why individuals elect to stay and return, about what keeps people connected to the community. Chris’s primary appreciation about staying in the small town is that “[a] lot of my family’s from the area.” After discussing the impact of a desire to be closer to family on his decisions to move back after leaving the community for college, Dan describes his continued connection to his hometown by saying, “I’m obviously connected here because it’s where I live and this is where my family is.” In this matter of fact statement family references a long-standing history of multiple generations residing in the community, something Dan and Chris both refer to when they discuss their desire to farm in the area like generations of their family had done before them. As Chris describes, “It’s like I said I have a lot of family around and I don’t know. I guess nobody has really went [*sic*] anywhere. And we all stick together yet.”

The value of being near to family moves beyond one’s immediate family to include extended family as well. For instance, Leah describes the importance of being able to spend time

with her grandfather, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Many of the interviewees describe practices of family reunions and holiday gatherings with their extended families. Interlocutors also discuss the relative proximity of many members of their family and their ideas of family as a perpetual, invaluable network of support that outlasts any friendship. As an example, Valerie explains how many of her connections to the community are based on the fact that much of her and her husband's families are near, describing:

I've got both my parents live here. [My husband] Pat's mom still lives here. We've got tons of aunts and uncles, cousins. I've got two of my brothers that live right here in the same community. . . . I'm connected like I said through church. And then just our social network of friends that we know we can go and hang out with when you're looking for something to do. . . . I know some people can't wait to get away from home, but I like being close. . . . I might not even talk to my mom for weeks at a time. You know I can always see that she's in church, or you know whatever and know that she is there. Call them when I'm baking something and "Oh God. I'm one egg short."

She continues by talking about how her siblings and their spouses are also part of her and her husband's social network of friends. Kate reinforces the value of having family close, ascertaining, "[M]y kids learned to dial my mom's phone number when they were very young. They'd just call and visit. . . . I think that's a formative for living that way of life." An another exemplar narrative, Leah references prior conversations with her older sister who asserts that raising children would be more difficult without having family close by for support. When discussing her "coming back" practices Leah says that having friends at college "wasn't as much of a priority as being at home with family." Leah concludes that "[f]riends are friends, but family will be there forever." Such a statement characterizes an underlying assumption that explicates interlocutors' prioritization of family relationships. Valerie and Leah allude to sentiments among interlocutors that family takes the role of friends.

Discussion of family turns to the rural community itself as a family. Forms of the metaphor "it's a family" and the simile "it's like a family" begin to appear to characterize and

name the family-like relationships people from the community experience, relationships that keep people “staying” and “returning.” Rita is the first of the interlocutors to describe community relationships with a familial simile, remarking at three separate moments, “It’s like a big family.” Rita further characterizes the value of community as family and the centrality of this metaphor/simile for assigning meaning to everyday relationships by claiming:

It’s just like a big family. Really. I mean you know that they’re there for you and we’re there for them. . . . I think it’s just about the same answer to a lot of these questions because we go back being a family.

Discursively constructed familial relationships with community members are at the core of understanding “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” Rita appreciates and thrives on knowing that community members are part of a supportive, consistent social network that extends beyond one’s own family. When describing how much she enjoys seeing young people “returning” and participating in community life Rita remarks, “So, it rolls to a bigger, bigger family.” For Rita young people are always part of the greater family and the families of younger generations who have left, even if they are not living in the community, become part of the community family as well. Sandra offers a narrative of her husband’s efforts to make the spouse of someone who grew-up in and left the community feel welcome at the town picnic. Sandra’s example reiterates the close and considerate relationships community members seek to foster. Regardless of whether or not younger generations and their families live in the community the community continues to care about them, considering them to be part of the greater community family. Familiarity and support begin to characterize motivations for “staying” and “returning” in interlocutor discourses.

The characterization of community as “family” continues to appear as interlocutors make sense of how the community stays connected to those who leave. John, who lived away from the

community for over decade before returning, characterizes how this close connection impacts “staying,” “going,” and “returning” practices when purporting:

Well this community is basically like another part of your family. You grew up with neighbors and their kids. You know people get old and they move away and come back to visit. And you know they’re just like friends. They’re like aunts and uncles or cousins that you know you knew your whole life. So, it’s kind of neat.

John references the practices of growing up, moving away, and returning to visit. As young people get older and “come back to visit” family they not only return to visit their parents and grandparents, they come back to visit their “neighbors,” the community members that have become “another part of [their] family” just as “aunt and uncles or cousins . . . you knew you whole life.” In this way people from the community are more than casual acquaintances. Jessica explains how much she values her relationships with “the older generation” as these relationships have become more significant with the death of her own grandparents, expounding:

I guess just when you experience someone dying you always have that connection. Like the older generations is always coming up to you. And some people have grown to be like grandparents, second grandparents. Just like getting to know them from my grandparents [we now have that connection].

When responding to questions about the community’s meaning in her life, Jessica concludes, “It’s like a family honestly. Everybody’s like family. I don’t know. I can’t imagine life without the small town.” John and Jessica’s commentary speaks to the value of having close and lasting relationships with community members, relationships not experienced elsewhere.

The collectivistic notion of community being like a family pervades motivations for “staying” and “returning” experienced by young people. Moreover, the use of familial similes and metaphors to label and describe community relationships implies a sense of care and consistency that is not experienced to the same degree outside the small town life. Leah recreates conversations with friends from college who would visit during the town picnic and

comment on the unique family-like relationships and interactions. Leah narrates the comments to explain her own affinity for the community, contending:

They were just like—they were so amazed. Or like, “All you people. You just get together like you’re a family.” You know that’s not [everywhere]. You can’t find that everywhere. So that’s way I like it [here] so much.

Knowing people “your whole life” builds relationships of familiarity interlocutors find that are best described with a family label. Dan attests, “[Y]ou know some of my closest friends are my family.” In the context of the interview transcript I cannot interpret whether Dan means that his family also serves the role of friends, or if he considers his friends to be so close that they are like family. Regardless, Dan’s assertion underscores the value of interpersonal relationships in informants’ lives. The use of the family simile and metaphor symbolizes implied support and constancy interlocutors experience in their hometown.

Specific exemplars scattered throughout narratives illuminate why interlocutors draw on the family metaphor or simile. Leah describes the community as “tight knit” and believes that “people here care so much more,” pointing out the support her own family received at the death of her uncle. She echoes previous interviewees by relying that “everybody is a family.” Valerie discusses the familial connection provided by the community saying, “We just have so much support.” While she believes support is “probably getting to [be] a little bit less than when I was younger” as people have less time to interact, fewer of the younger generation attend church, and others move away, Valerie points out that “most of the people that live here are family or friends” and “[e]verybody’s grown up here.” Connections to the community are deep.

Reasons for caring are explained by people’s collectivistic orientations. After providing specific example of the ways people reach out to and pray for each other in times of hardship Valerie concludes that “it’s more like a family than a town.” Interlocutors find community

support a core value to small town life that contrasts to their perceptions of “the city.” Implicitly arguing motivations for “staying,” Valerie positions relationships built on values of faith and family as a unique aspect that would be difficult to find outside the rural community when she explicitly purports:

So, people just care about each other. So, I think it would be harder [to find similar supportive relationships]. I mean I don't think it would be impossible, but I think it would be harder to make those kinds of connections in a big city. I think you would have to tie it to your church or some other club that you got. It might not necessarily be your neighbors.

Rita argues that “our faith is very important to us.” She again uses the metaphor of family to explicate the importance of shared faith and prayer in difficult times, noting, “And you know it's wonderful to have that [faith] because they know that the community, or your family, the town family, the community is praying more for them.” Rita's choice of descriptor, “town family,” epitomizes the sort of ambiguously bounded familial relationships with the entire community interlocutors represent in their narratives. Providing another specific example of care and constancy in addition to the church Leah describes how family is formed around the school. Leah talks about the Catholic elementary and middle school closing when she was in high school, reflecting that “it was still hard” because that school was “part of my past” and “no kids were gonna have that feeling anymore.” Leah's comments express concern over losing something that had been a constant in the community, “the school family.” Leah supports her own growing up experiences with conversations she has had with her co-workers, many of whom are her former teachers, claiming:

The school has an aura around it. You walked in those doors and you felt like you were in a family. . . . [After the schools consolidated] it was rough around the edges. It was almost like a public school atmosphere. And [the teachers] had to work really hard to get that like “We love you. You are part of our family” atmosphere back because it just wasn't the same.

The church, the school, and the entire community become described through the metaphor/simile of “family.” “Family” explicates interaction and ways of assigning meaning to relationships. “Family” further becomes a means of articulating what I characterize in interviews as a “sense of community” that interlocutors allude to throughout the ethnographic interviews, but do not concisely name. The “sense of community” and the “sense of family” are synonymous. According to Alicia, who directs my naming, like the unwavering support of family amidst change “the community sense definitely never changes.” Although the school’s closing changed the community, the “community sense” persists through commitment to the family metaphor and its shared meaning among people from the rural community.

Member check interviews validate the use of the term “family” to characterize the community. When asking whether the label “town family” characterizes their experience of small town life all five informants deem the term sufficient. John says, “I’d say it’s pretty accurate because you know a small town kind of is like your family.” He goes on to describe how people interact in the community, taking an interesting in each other’s lives in the same way that family does, continuing:

[Y]ou run into a lot of the same people and you visit with them. . . . [Y]ou know different events they’ve been doing. So you ask them different questions, how they’re doing, or they ask you. You know they’re parents, so you ask about them. So every week you are probably asking them questions that you would ask you family the same thing. So it is kind of like a town family.

Alicia further confirms, “Yeah. Just everyone’s there for each other. . . . You just feel like family. . . . Everyone feels like family.” Before being asked to confirm the use of “town family” to describe the community Nicole pronounces:

They’re like a close knit family—like the community has to come together to make their livelihoods work, to make the town work and stay thriving and alive. In a way you rely on each just like family.

Nicole then ratifies “town family,” accepting, “Sounds pretty good to me. Like that’s your town, that’s your family. I guess that makes sense.” When asked if she had another appropriate label Nicole then amends the term, surmising:

I would just leave it at family. I wouldn’t add the town. Kind of like your second family. You know like your immediate family—your first cousin and your extended family is like your FAMILY. And then your second family is your small town community. Friends.

Chris compromises on the term. He likes how the descriptor gets at the ways “it’s just like a family [because] everybody comes together and helps.” However, he does not like the way that “town family” implies that people “know your business,” extending, “If it’s something that you don’t want to get out then I don’t like that term.” Chris’s differentiation highlights tensions of autonomy people from rural communities contend with continually. Sandra’s interview suggests implications of these tensions between individual and family.

Reiterating the community as family metaphor, Sandra extends in her discourse, “It’s a family.” She characterizes the value of community suggesting, “I think there’s a little sense of family and pride.” Because the community interacts as family Sandra believes that people are “more easily [*sic*] to pitch in,” yet she discusses the tensions that arise having such intimate relationships with community members. Sandra married and moved into the community, however, she actually has distant relatives in the area. She found a “sense of pride” that either she or her husband is “pretty much related to everyone.” While many of the community members express an affinity for living close to family Sandra admits that at times such relative proximity to relatives can be tenuous. Disclosing a potential motivation for leaving—to not be so close to family—she admits that “sometimes family can choke you to death.” Expanding upon this statement Sandra says:

It's a balance of you know that they love you, but I also know too that sometime you have to learn to be your own boss. And sometimes you have to disappoint people and not do everything they say to jump to and do what you think you have to do. And that sometimes may be a mixed of good and bad, Dr. Jackal and Mr. Hyde.

Without explicitly stating it, Sandra reveals a tension between “staying” near family to live out their expectations and “going” in order to “do what you think you have to do.” She states that over the years she has come to better manage the constraints. Sandra names the relational-dialectic tension of closeness, separateness and connectedness (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). Without making explicit transitions from talking about relatives as family to discussing the community as family Sandra characterizes the same tension she experiences living close to family when living in a community where everyone knows each other and maintains close interpersonal relationships with one another. She begins unpacking the constraints of Rita's “town family” label. Sandra asserts that in a small town everyone must contribute to the community to ensure its future, yet she admits that involvement can be taxing:

There's still this closeness, but sometimes there can also be—the part you don't want to admit is that somebody knows you do this [skill set well], so you get dumped on. I think it's fine to compromise with yourself. . . . It's probably coming with maturity and age on my part. It's alright to say “no” once and awhile. That's probably the part [I dislike about living in a small town].

Lydia: So in this sense of community sometimes you're asked to do lots because people know you have skills or interests?

Sandra: Or interests and you care to be involved. Yes. But sometimes I've learn also [that] it's okay to say “no.” Because for your own health and well-being and the community too, [it's okay] to say “no.” You can give your advice and do this [part of it], but you get to say “no.”

Sandra's assertion that “sometimes family can choke you to death” underscores discussions about saying “no” and maintaining personal boundaries. Balancing family parallels learning “to say ‘no’” to volunteering in the community. Saying “no” reveals that being part of the supportive “town family” requires arduous negotiations of community commitment and personal autonomy. The simile/metaphor “it's (like) a family” comes to symbolize dynamic

negotiations between shared supportive relationships not experienced elsewhere and a need for personal independence that underscores the researcher appropriated categories of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” as considerations for remaining or leaving one’s rural hometown. Like a loving family, Sandra suggests that individuals come to rely on care and support, yet at other moments feel smothered by the closeness and lack of autonomy from family and community. The dynamic, dialectical interplay, or “balance of you know that they love you, but . . . sometime you have to learn to be your own boss,” is exemplified in discourses assigning meaning to iterations of the taxonomy “everybody knows everybody.”

“Everybody knows everybody.”

The taxonomy “everybody knows everybody” is at the heart of multi-valenced tensions experienced by those who grow-up and live in a small town. The taxonomy is premised by the usage of “everybody” in all 11 interviews as characterizing assumed similarity among people from the community.¹ Knowing everyone is understood as a positive attribute to living in a small town and a contiguous motivation for “staying” and “returning.” Familiarity with one another fosters a sense of reciprocity, trust, and security among other esteemed values associated with living in a rural community. Interlocutors affirm that as a result of familiarity “everybody knows everybody” becomes “everybody cares about everybody.” Conversely, “everybody knows everybody” is discursively constructed at times as a negative quality of rural community life, an arguable explanation for “leaving” the “town family.”

Many of the interlocutors describe, among numerous positive evaluations of “everybody knows everybody,” practices of bringing food to a family’s home during a tragic time, taking pride in the aesthetic presentation of the town, or knowing that if they needed assistance their neighbors would be available to help. These examples support an awareness among community

members that they can rely on one another for support because “everybody [truly] cares about everybody.” On the contrary, interlocutors dislike the perception and the reality that “everybody knows your business.” While “everybody know[ing] your business” has the potential to facilitate conversation and foster relationships, community access to more intimate knowledge about one’s personal and family life can be an unfavorable result. Because community members not only know each other personally and over time but also know each other’s family and generations of history some participants express frustrations about unwelcomed opinions and involvement of community perspectives in one’s personal life. Alicia summarizes the sentiment when she admits that “growing up here nobody ever had any secrets.” Despite interlocutors lamenting the lack of privacy, for those who remain in the community “everybody knows everybody” is in the end understood as more favorable even if “everyone knows your business.”

Interviewees thrive on the “friendly” and “supportive” nature of small town life. In describing how “the church community and the town community is you know sort of all melded into one” Valerie concludes she likes life in a small town not only because “[i]t’s just my hometown,” but because “everybody knows everybody [and] [e]verybody sort of watches out for everybody.” Rita adds, “People are friendly. You get to know everyone. You need help they’re there. We can help them.” As a young person Jessica shares community members’ discourses, reinforcing the value of “[everybody] knowing everyone,” adding:

I just kind of grew up knowing everyone. . . . I mean they really care about what you do in your life and what you’re doing, how you’re doing, and if they can help you in any way. Everyone’s always willing to help others out. I really like that.

Interacting with each other in some capacity is central to maintaining community relationships. Rita further expounds that she does not have to talk to her neighbors, but knowing that they are there offers a sense of security, asserting:

[W]e know the people and I wouldn't give it up for nothing because—well maybe we don't see each other every day. Just like our neighbors. We know that their light's on and we think 'Oh they're fine. They're doing good.' It's not verbal every day, but it's a sense that they're there and they're comfortable.

Rita's narrative situated the value of reciprocal care, of "a sense that they're there" if we need them, and we care enough to know whether or not "they're comfortable." The community is grounded in shared concern and kindness towards each other. Rita's narrative demonstrate that care is not only expressed, but an understood assumption that, as Valerie previously put it, "[e]verybody sort of watches out for everybody." An assumed acknowledgement operates in the community. Rita's former narrative is supported by her consternation towards her daughter's neighbor in the city. Rita takes comfort in knowing the people around her, attesting:

It's sad. Cus that one neighbor, she just waters. I was in the backyard of Sara's and she just watered her flowers and just kind of waved. Not even wave[s] sometimes. It's like, "Come one." You know?

Lydia: Could you live in a place like that here you didn't know you neighbors?

Rita: No. I want to know [my neighbors].

While the sense of security extends beyond everyday interaction, interlocutors characterize the community's "friendliness" by talking about constant everyday interaction with people they know. John describes the small town life as "laid-back" atmosphere, "friendliness" and "quiet" of life in a small town observing, "[Y]ou have friends drive back and forth . . . and they wave at you. . . . If you go to town, you know everybody." Kate posits, "I tell you it's impossible to get a good walk in because you have to stop always [to talk]. And everybody says, 'Hello.'" Chris, who avows to being a "social person," likes that "you go to the post office or the bank or anywhere. . . [and] it's not like you [can] just look at somebody. You always got to stop and say either just 'hi' or a couple of words." Dan contrasts small town life observing, "I mean back here you would [be] driving down the road and then just stop and in the road and talk to people." Taken together to reflect the sentiments of interlocutors, these brief narratives

regarding interactional practices when “everybody knows everybody” reveal that “back here” “you have to stop” to “say a couple of words” to fellow community members. In other words, interaction is predicated on an eternal sense of “friendliness” also premised on an affinity the family-like space of the small town that interlocutors characterized as “everybody [talks to] everybody.” Such an expectation contrasts with other potential understandings of living outside of the familiar community experienced when individuals engage in “going” practices.

Operating under such assumptions of kindness and concern “everybody knows everybody” facilitates everyday interactions interlocutors come to expect. Augmenting previous exemplars of community “friendliness,” Nicole confirms the centrality of community in her life, saying, “It’s just friendly. I know everybody.” Nicole discusses the expectation to converse, the ease of interaction, and the establishment of commonality when “everybody knows everybody.” That said, her narrative begins to allude to the tension of familiarity with community members as multi-valenced. She reports:

I would say that I have a lot of really good relationships with people. I know pretty much everybody. Everybody’s kind. So even if you don’t necessary know them, you can still go up and ask them how things are going. You might not know them that personally, but you still kind of have an idea of what they’re doing, so you always have something you can ask them about or talk about. And you know in small towns they say that everybody knows your business in a small town. Well, it is true. You know there’s not that many people, so you know everybody. You hear things. So even if you don’t necessarily hear it from them—what they’re doing these days—you know. Everybody just knows. So, I don’t know. It’s just easy to make those relationships—cus like I said—because you know [everybody].

“Everybody knows your business” is understood as both positive and negative. While it gives interlocutors something to talk about in everyday interaction, at times there are some things that individuals would rather not (have to) discuss. Leah provides a personal narrative to illustrate how this experience plays out pragmatically in her experience of rural community life:

Everybody knows everybody's business, which can be seen as a positive. But it can also be seen as a negative. . . . Like when my brother. He went to college and he got into some drugs and alcohol. . . . Completely wrong path. So mom and dad pulled him out of school, brought him home. He was in his mid-twenties and they just didn't know what else to do, so they took him to rehab. Well, it was Christmas time. So then at church EVERYONE noticed that he wasn't at church. You know what I mean? "Oh, where's Michael?" So then it was like, "Ok, we're in church. We can't lie." Then everyone knows. Everyone knows your dirty laundry and your clean laundry. So you have to take the good with the bad.

Despite narratives about how meaningful and important "everybody know[ing] everybody" is to interlocutors for fostering a sense of belonging and an awareness that people care about each other, interviewees admit that sometimes they dislike "everybody knowing everything about your life." Young people resolve that, in Dan's words, "a lot of people know your business that you don't want them to know" and, at some level, one must learn how "to take the good with the bad," as Leah says. Supporting other interviewees' discourses, Dan accepts this tension as reality, adding:

But that's some that most people just get used to. And a lot of people expect it. But in contrast to the people in the city . . . it's like people don't want you to know them. Even though you're surrounded by strangers I guess.

Even if people in the community know "your business that you don't want them to know," they provide positive support that one does not find when "you're surrounded by strangers" as Dan discerns. If a person lives in a small town they come to accept that other community members will gather personal information and make speculations. Yet care and concern seem to exceed the potential of negative implications of "knowing everyone." Jessica finds the benefits of "knowing everyone" a key reason for "returning" and constructing belonging, asserting:

You know all the people. Sometimes that can be bad because they go and say, "Oh well, so and so did this today." And, "I see them here today." But you get that everywhere. I like living in a small town because the people, the acknowledgement. Everyone's

concerned with you. Why that may be a good thing or a bad thing. But I like that aspect. And they're all concerned with your schooling and your family.

Jessica makes an intriguing observation when she suggests, "But you get that everywhere." Such a statement seems to contradict the idea that "knowing everyone" is a unique positive to living in small town as well as the idea that no matter where one lives people will be in one's "business." In fact, other interlocutors argue that a city life entitles one to immense, if not isolating, privacy because nobody cares about each other to same interpersonal degree. First, I argue that Jessica's statement expresses the ultimate resolve that "people will be in your business," that people might tell each other "so and so did this today" even if "so and so" did not want others to know. When asked what she does not like about living in a small town Alicia responds, "When they go tell your mom and dad, 'Well, I saw her at this place and she was doing this.' That's basically the only thing." Such a statement alludes to the ways "everybody knows everybody" potentially contributes to gossip among members of the community. Second, I posit that Jessica's orientation towards the idea that "everybody knows everybody's business" when she says "you get that everywhere" is intended to express a belief that gossip occurs in all settings, not just the small town.

Other interlocutors are less explicit in describing the tension between "everybody knowing everybody" and "everybody knows everybody's business." Rather, they take a comedic stance, mentioning the tension in their interviews but connecting the strain to other complexities of small town life. Rita remains adamant throughout her interview about the importance of knowing and interacting with her neighbors and knowing people in the community. Yet when directly asked, "Is it nice to know everybody?" Rita responds, "No." She then laughs as an interpreted indication of the tension of people being too involved in one's life. Immediately after her momentary laugh she says, "It's just like a big family. Really. I

mean you know that they're there for you and we're there for them." Rita offers a humorous, more indirect expression of the tension through laughter, momentarily admitting that having such close relationship is not always desirable. However, she returns to the core assumption that familiarity and community support outweighs whatever reasons would lead her to respond that "No, [it is not nice to know everybody]." By immediately describing knowing everyone as "a big family" she relates the community to a dialectic of autonomy and collectivity that individuals, particularly young people transitioning into adulthood, often feel in a family relationship. Here collectivity surpasses autonomy. As Chris depicts community life, "You know everybody and everybody gets along. There is some drama. [Laughing.] But everybody seems to brush that off." Collectivity offsets "drama" as ironically conveyed and followed by a comedic reaction exemplifying that people do accept the contentious "annoyance" of having no privacy as a necessary corollary to the "blessing" of being surrounded by a caring "town family."

Sandra too makes a passing statement before moving on with her interview, admitting nonchalantly that one of the "little quarks about living in a small town" is that "[y]eah, everybody knows your business to a certain degree. I think when I was younger there was more [I disliked though]." She goes on to express her more definitive dislike of life in a small town being "getting dumped on" regarding her role and expectation to volunteer and learning "to say 'no.'" She then firmly argues, "Everybody needs to give. I know some can't give all money. But I says [*sic*] it's called a paintbrush. Time. Picking up. Clean up. . . . You know it's little things that are key." Sandra's narrative demonstrates that when "everybody knows everybody" certain assumptions about community participation develop among residents.² Sandra dislikes that people know she will volunteer, yet in her narrative she makes assumptions about how often other people volunteer according to the community standards to which she is expected to

conform. In this instance, Sandra desires personal autonomy (i.e., “to say ‘no’”) while simultaneously arguing from a collectivistic orientation of volunteerism in order to contribute to the common good of the community.

Family, both in practice and in metaphor, is central to characterizing implications of “everybody knowing everybody.” Kate discusses at length how everyone knowing your family can lead to adverse assumptions among people from the community when she contends:

I think there’s a perception about everybody knowing your business. And people make some assumptions I think based on who your parents were, your grandparents. And I don’t mean mine in particular. I mean everyone who lives in this community. You know we make assumption on how they think and how they act, how they invest their money. I mean that it’s the whole gamut of things that we can assume because we’ve known generations of the same people.

Not only does “everybody know everybody,” everybody knows everybody’s family, their personal past, and their family’s past throughout the generations. Later in her interview, Kate mentions that her motivation for working as a nurse outside the community is partly due to her concern over “preconceived notions.” She states:

I’ve always chosen to work in [the neighboring county]. And partly because that idea of preconceived notions to me is a big deal. So I could go there and care for folks without knowing what their parents did, or how many times they were married, or that they quit going to church, or they cheated on their taxes. I could really give care for the sake of giving care. And that’s always been very important to me.

Close relationships with the community, while demonstrating valuable and strong collective motivation for “staying” or “returning,” also serve as motivation to leave. When asked later in her interview if she had ever thought about moving away Kate reinforces all three taxonomies, hence demonstrating the dynamic tensions of “staying,” “going,” and “returning.”

Kate expounds:

Have I ever wanted to live somewhere else? Yeah. Occasionally. I think it’s hard to raise your children when everybody’s telling you how to do it. And again that’s part of [being] in this age group now it’s—as I said, it’s the generosity and the kindness. But I

think when my kids were little and everybody said I wasn't potty training them right—you know—[or] that I let them drink too much orange juice [I might have wanted to live somewhere else]. It's the whole thing. I think that that would have been easier, and maybe not easier, just less controversial if I lived in someplace bigger where people wouldn't pay attention. Love big cities. In traveling at different times, I've thought "Oh, wouldn't it be nice to live here so many months of the year or something." But you know you start to the longer you're there—you appreciate coming back.

Lydia: And what makes you appreciate coming back?

Kate: The quiet. Clean air. Knowing that people care about you. Being able to be involved without it being a career choice.

Paralleling Sandra's discussion, Kate makes two key moves in her discourse. First, Kate mentions that as she has gotten older her appreciation for the closeness of the community has increased. Both women discuss that when they were younger they became more frustrated by the involvement, opinions, and subsequent interference of family and community in their lives. Kate speculates that in some ways life "would have been easier" and in some ways "not easier" if she had raised her family away from her hometown. Kate admits to imagining a life elsewhere, yet she quantifies a temporal limitation when she entertains moving to a city for "so many months of the year." Kate suggests that life would be "just less controversial if I lived in someplace bigger where people wouldn't pay attention." In other words, getting away from the microcosm of the small town could be desirable, at least at times. Essentially, Kate indicates that if she was to move she would come back; she would not live in a city permanently because she values her small town life. The unique sense of care she experiences in her community is enough to "come back." Kate is grounded in the generosity and kindness of the community, an orientation that informs her subsequent intriguing move in the previous discourse. Second, like Sandra when discussing the tensions of community closeness, Kate rather abruptly begins speculating on the centrality of volunteer involvement to community life. I probe to understand what she means by community involvement "without it being a career choice." Kate asserts:

Like I think in a large city things like [a community club] would be paid position. You know somebody's who's really active. And so I think that they tend to look for folks who have those degrees and those things. I think that we take our leadership in small towns for granted. I tell you it used to always trouble me. Or it did trouble me when the high school started putting in the paper that they were having "Help the Citizens" days and making it part of the curriculum. I was like, "Seriously!" I think some of those things were expectations for us. . . . People don't give themselves credit for those extra—I mean as adults—for those extracurricular leadership things. You know we don't have a degree, but somebody's good at it and they volunteer to do it. So I think that some of that in a city would be more career oriented.

For community members and young people alike community membership is not a self-serving orientation. Rather, it is discursively constructed around collective orientations to community, to finding personal belonging and support as well as participating and offering one's own talents and skills towards improvement of the community. In a small town everyone contributes to the common good. College degrees and career goals are less salient. Hence, despite "everybody know[ing] everybody" becoming a source of frustration when others are deemed not to be carrying their weight, "everybody know[ing] everybody" is the foundation of altruistic service to one another and, moreover, community life.

For all the interlocutors discussed previously Alicia diverges on her final evaluation of "everybody knows everybody." Alicia, who lived in the community until she graduated from high school and left for college, immediately describes the community and the tension of closeness and care, saying:

Well, everybody knows you and everybody knows your parents and you really couldn't do ANYTHING AT ALL without it getting back to them. I mean there was this one time that I was [at work] and I must have been really tired or something. I was like just completely spaced out and I don't even remember being spaced out, but I heard about it when I got home because it was mentioned to my parents because everybody knows everybody. Everybody kind of looks out for everybody and takes care of everybody. And [it's] just a close knit community.

In this articulation Alicia abruptly shifts from "everybody knows everybody" to "everybody . . . takes care of everybody" as she recognizes the multi-valenced (i.e., "an

annoyance” and “a blessing”) reality of growing up in a rural community where support and familiarity are central. She later elaborates:

And sometimes everyone knowing everything about your life can be as much of an annoyance as it can be a blessing when there are certain things you didn't necessary need everyone to know. Yeah. I guess it's just kind of a two-sided coin. It is what it is. You know?

Lydia: Can you talk more about—more specific things you like, or specific annoyances?
Alicia: Well most of my family is still here and I really like that they are all right here. It makes coming home—it's really coming home. You don't have to go anyplace else to see everybody. When good things happen to you it's nice that everyone knows about it ten seconds later. When bad things happen it's not so great that everybody knows just cus you know you don't always need everybody to know every detail of your life.

Throughout her interview Alicia returns to the idea of life being “still the same” and a belief that “nothing here changes which isn't true, but it seems like nothing here ever changes because you know that whole spirit of that community and everybody being together never changes.” Later in the interview Alicia concludes, “So, I mean, I guess that's a way it feels the same. Because they already know all the stuff about you. You have no secrets. Cus growing up here nobody ever had any secrets.” In the end, while Alicia is particularly devoted to her hometown as she describes it with highly emotive sentiments such as “home home” and “my history. . . . where I've come from,” she elects to live and work elsewhere. Unlike other participants Alicia would rather not work in a community where she knows everybody and everybody knows her, emphasizing:

I mean I teach. I could do that anywhere. I could do that here. But it would be completely different because—I mean half of the kids are your younger cousins and you know the other ones are raised by—you know the children of family friends, or some sort of relative, or their parents have known you since you were two. It's not—you wouldn't get the same kind of respect and they'd still see you as you know the little girl who ran around in Christmas dresses in the summer time. You know? As opposed to you know you go to some place where nobody knows you. You're automatically a respected authority figure.

According to this final narrative, to Alicia the idea that “everybody knows everybody” is perceived as more of “an annoyance” than “a blessing.” While Alicia, like other interlocutors, still takes comfort in knowing the people of the community and having family nearby, she does not feel that being a teacher in the community would allow her to be respected in the same way that she is when working in a place where people have not known Alicia her entire life, and perhaps still view her as a kid rather than as an adult. Moreover, the reality that much of her extended family resides in the community and has lived here for generations means that not only is she related to many people, but the perception and interests of family contribute to a cultural space of generations. Alicia’s presence in the community only continues a history created by past generations and this history combined with familial involvement can be smothering. By living elsewhere and “coming back” to the place where “everybody knows everybody” Alicia maintains her independence and autonomy while still “returning” to the collective community.

What appears as a career choice signifies a deeper negotiation of tensions expressed yet opposed by other interlocutors’ discourses, which elucidate that being together ultimately outweighs being apart. It bears noting again that amidst emotive expressions of her relationship to the community and resolve that she wants autonomy, when asked explicitly, “So, do you ever think you’ll move back here?” Alicia concedes:

No. . . . If I did—and you know I guess it’s not an out of the question thing—it would be you know so my kids would have the same kind of growing up experience in a smaller, safer community. But I would still work in the city. I’ve grown very accustomed to my job and the position that I have. But I mean if—if I did, it would be for that reason.

Such a statement does not suggest a resentment of her life in the rural community. Rather, Alicia continues a perpetual vacillation about where her connections lie as she attests that she is not coming back, yet then says, for example, that her apartment in the city is not really her home, “just where I live.” The brief discourse above represents a nearly 40 minute discussion of

fraught with tension of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” stated and unstated. Additionally, an idealized perception about raising children in the community emerges. Alicia, Chris, Dan, and Leah all discuss wanting to raise a family in the same small town environment that they grew up in and John and Kate support these discourses about the security and friendliness of the community and having family close by, while Kate expresses the difficulty of raising her kids when “everybody knows everybody.” This idealize perception further recognizes and situates interlocutors’ affinity for the “town family” and for raising children to be a part of the generations of history that interlocutors confirm, contest, and “come to terms with” in articulations of the three localized taxonomies featured in this chapter.

Perhaps as Sandra and Kate suggest, age will shift Alicia’s orientation, or perhaps the “town family” will remain too microcosmic and familiar to catalyze a return. While Alicia is left to “come to terms with” her own “staying,” “going,” and “returning” outside the positing of a relatively short-term ethnographic study, she remains committed to visiting “home home” and remembering, “You always have connections through the memories and background, your history. You always take that with you. Always.” While her return is facilitated by an the opportunity to reconnect with her past by continuing to return to cultural space where the generations of her family before have also called “home home,” Alicia is drawn forward to live the liminal contradiction “betwixt and between” the small town life and appeal of experiences outside such a way of being (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Alicia says she always knew she would not stay, yet she remains grounded in “what you take with you.” Her ways of assigning meaning to experience are ever more filtered through growing up in a small town and all its complexities.

Perhaps the contrast in growing up in a cultural space of generations where “everybody knows everybody” is best summarized in an anecdote from John, who narrates:

When we first came back we enrolled our children in Catholic school. And when we were signing them up it was almost like a class reunion. Because here's all these little kids that don't know anyone, but all of us parents—like my wife and I, we grew up around here. So we're going back to school now to sign up these kids and all these kids' parents are our classmates. Or maybe they were a year older or a year younger, or married one of our classmates, or whatever. So, when we got done with signing them up—it should have probably taken, what a half hour or so to sign them up? Three hours later we're visiting with everybody's that there. My daughter grabs me on the sleeve and says, "Dad, so you know everybody here?" And I kinda looked around at her and I kind said, "Yeah, I do everybody here." . . . And she was just amazed that I knew everybody that was there. But she didn't realize that I grew-up around here.

John recounts an experience of familiar and community recognition that his daughter had never experience in her life thus far growing up in a city, nor had he perhaps realized the affective impact. John reiterates this same story to me in our member check emphasizing, "[S]he couldn't believe I knew everybody we ran into, which to me they're just people—all old friends of mine I knew years ago. So that's really neat." Member check interviews capture concisely sentiments among interlocutors of "everybody knowing everybody" as multi-valenced, yet ultimately positive. Nicole enumerates the benefits and challenges, returning to the familial taxonomy to recognize:

It's got its ups and downs in that area. There are things you want people to know and you have things that you want to keep private. Sometimes though private things become public and they spread like wildfire. But for the most part I would say it's positive. . . They're like a close knit family—like the community has to come together to make their livelihoods work, to make the town work and stay thriving and alive. In a way you rely on each just like family.

In the following chapter I return to the experience of those young adults who leave and the appeal of an experience outside the small town most often offered by attending college, yet an experience dejected by the four young people who ultimately return.

Chapter Conclusion

Interlocutors discursively construct "staying," "going," and "returning" through three complex taxonomies negotiated in everyday life. "You come back," "it's (like) a family," and

“everybody knows everybody” represent orientations and motivations for leaving as well as remaining in the community. Following the conclusion of chapter three, community members want young people to “come back,” even to visit, and young people feel drawn to “returning.” Collectivist motivations are mediated by an orientation to community life described through comparisons to familial relationships. “It’s (like) a family” signifies an overarching awareness of the community as a “town family.” Hence, small town life proceeds under the assumption that people are concerned and involved in not only their nuclear and extended families, but in the lives of everybody. Despite the centrality of familiarity and care in describing the community as or like a family, interlocutors reveal inherent tensions when “everybody knows everybody.” Kindness, support, and “friendliness” are conceded to the reality that in the small town “you have no secrets.” At times there is reason to imagine a life as “less controversial if I lived in someplace bigger where people wouldn’t pay attention.” Pragmatically, the tension that “sometimes everyone knowing everything about your life can be as much of an annoyance as it can be a blessing” must be negotiated in order to “come to terms with cultures” (Philipsen, 2008), the subject of the final analysis chapter. Interlocutors’ narrative stories articulate a corollary between “coming to terms” with the dialectic of community closeness and young people’s practices of “staying,” “going,” and “returning.”

Endnotes

¹ While Chris is less implicit in articulating “everybody knows everybody,” he explicitly and repeatedly uses “everybody” to encapsulate descriptions of his life in the rural community, defining people as a singular and cohesive group. For example: “Everybody is just really easy to get along with.” “Everybody works together.” “When everybody’s like that in a small town it just makes everything that much more better.” The usage of “everybody” or “everyone” assumes that one knows every person in the community and that every person shares the same community identity.

² In her member check Sandra explicitly says, “Sometimes they stereotype you because of families.”

Chapter Five

The previous chapters have broadly assessed how people in a rural community make sense of young people's practices of "staying," "going," and "returning" and then looked to interlocutors' narratives to find the more nuanced taxonomy of terms for naming this phenomenon. This final analysis chapter seeks to engage my final research question, which asks:

RQ 3: What do participant discourses reveal about "coming to terms with cultures" (Philipsen, 2008)—the negotiation of two or more cultural codes in one's life—[regarding practices of "staying," "going," and "returning" among young people]?

By developing "coming to terms with cultures" as a call for further disciplinary inquiry Philipsen (2008) refers "to the study of situations in which someone not only tries to learn, but tries to come to terms with, to contend with, as it were, the presence in their life world of two or more cultural codes" (p. 3). However, in the interview materials I collected interlocutors focus on a predominant code of honoring the collective identity associated with community membership. This code takes precedence in making sense of young people's practices of "staying," "going," and "returning." Yet informants admit that among young people who leave for further education and do not or cannot return to the community, a code of individuality must be honored.

Philipsen (1992) outlines two albeit different and perhaps opposing cultural codes. A code of honor places value on the individual based on overarching adherence to community values. A code of dignity places moral worth of the individual as superseding that of the group. Considering that the rural community is grounded collectivistic orientation yet highly impacted by overarching U.S. American individualistic notions, I assert the codes of honor and dignity converge in a third liminal and focal code of recognition.

By a code of recognition I theorize from participant discourses a complex cultural code that seeks to honor individual autonomy and participation in cultural life outside the small town, yet ultimately grounds community identity in honoring the collective cultural space of generations to which young people seems indelibly situated. The code of recognition is central to how young people and the community come to terms with young people's practices of "staying," "going," and "returning" as these practices require the complex negotiations of multiple codes when used to make decisions surrounding leaving or remaining. Complexity is recognized in the tension between ideologies—young people must get "schooling" away from the community, yet the community's future lies in young people's ability to remain connected and contribute to the small town. I argue that the code of recognition is liminal, while often not discursively acknowledged as such, in so far as it represents coming to terms with both individualistic and collectivistic codes, and focal because (1) the code is localized, meaning it emanates from unique small town cultural identity in this instance, and (2) young people ultimately must elect to privilege autonomy or collectivity while simultaneously honoring the other.

Code of Going: Recognizing Autonomy

Leaving is a process that involves asserting independence. As implicated in chapter three "going" from the rural community to attend college is a commonly expected practice among young people, a rite of passage symbolic of autonomous adulthood. All five young adult interlocutors demonstrate its cultural value by addressing the college experience in their interviews, including Chris who elected not to leave. Chris describes his negotiation of whether or not to attend college when asked if he had ever thought about leaving, saying, "I did after—well my senior year of high school when I was deciding about schooling. . . . But that was the

only time I thought about it, was because of schooling.” Chris’s narrative acknowledges the college negotiations that he and his contemporaries experience. While Chris stayed, Dan, Alicia, and Leah saw a college education as necessary to their aspirations for careers and experiences outside the rural community. Dan synthesizes his own ideas upon high school graduation, saying, “Right out of high school. Thought I had to run away for a little bit. See what else is out there.” His statements reflect the discourses of Leah and Alicia who both concede that growing up they knew that once they graduated from high school they would leave to go to college.

While in her interview Alicia calls going to college and getting a job elsewhere “the norm,” in a member check with her she contests that going to college is an “assumption” “that maybe differs [from] family to family.” When asked to confirm or disconfirm “an expectation that younger generations would move away to go to college and find a job” the four other member checks informants (i.e., Chris, John, Nicole, and Sandra) agree that college is an “expectation” (see Appendix E: Member Check Protocol). Regardless of semantic labels, interlocutors acknowledge the role of a college education in allowing young people to assert independence. As Alicia further confirms in her member check, “For the young people there’s more of an opportunity to see more things outside the small microcosm of our town. I mean you can’t go to college like I said without leaving because there isn’t one.” In this way young people from a rural community must “come to terms with” a code of “going,” a presumption that they will indeed leave their hometown for college and a code that elucidates establishing autonomy and having experiences outside the small town life.

Code of Staying: Recognizing Collectivity

Nicole puts it succinctly when she says, “We take tradition seriously around here.” In the previous chapters the resolve of young people and community members to remain in the rural

community has been articulated in interminable dedication to family and community epitomized in the taxonomies “you come back,” “everybody knows everybody,” and “it’s (like) family.” The privileging of collectivity becomes the code of “staying,” a firm grounding among young people that they would like to stay in the community (even after obtaining a college degree). Among the young adults who left for college the collective values of community ground them in “staying” practices.

Although the phrase “not too close” asserts autonomy, Nicole recognizes the code of the collective when articulating her logic for selecting her college: (1) “It was close, but not too close.” (2) “It was an environment that I’m used to . . . the small town.” (3) “I had a lot of friends going there.” Like her college bound peers who ultimately returned, Nicole maintains her connection to the community and its value with her selection of colleges as well as her decision to come back. At the center of collectivistic concerns is an orientation towards family. Jessica’s voice affirms the chorus on this topic when attesting, “I can’t imagine going and living anywhere without my family. I talked to them every day.” Interlocutors live in a cultural space of generations as space governed by close and highly influential relationships with not only one’s immediate family, but the community “town family” at large.

Familiarity, familial relationships, and the regularity of inter-generational interactions are expressed in the maxim “everybody knows everybody.” As Alicia emphatically summarizes, “Well it seems like everybody in a small town knows everybody in the small town. And I don’t just mean by name or by face. I mean they know your entire family history. They know your entire genealogy.” While the lack of privacy inherent to the reality that “everybody knows everybody” can be an “annoyance,” ultimately interlocutors come to appreciate the “town family” as a “blessing.” Chris comments in his member check, “you know who belongs to

who,” meaning one knows whose family you are apart. I argue that Chris’s statement reflects other interlocutor discourses about continuing to be part of multiple generations of history in the community. “You know who belongs to who” suggests a deeper recognition of place and one’s enduring attachment to the community of people, a sense of belonging that supersedes wanderlust. As a self-identified “lifer” who enjoys traveling, Kate affirms this view when describing returning home after vacationing in cities across the U.S. landscape; she relishes in “the clean air, the standing in your own drive-way—the feeling that you belong becomes much more important I think.” For young people who enact the code of “staying” “the feeling that you belong becomes much more important” in their performance of and “coming to terms” with the cultural codes of “staying,” “going,” and “returning.”

Code of Returning: Focality

Each young person interviewed positions their identity as focused on the rural community of their childhood. The concentration on the community catalyzes a cultural code of “returning” motivated by desire to visit and/or live in the community. The code of “returning” is characterized by an affinity for remaining connected to the community with a peripheral acknowledgement of alternative codes of young adult autonomy in play. For Alicia, Dan, Jessica, Leah, and Nicole going to college was, as Alicia put it in her member check, “an opportunity to see more things outside the small microcosm of our town.” Alicia’s statement concedes an alternative code, yet Leah’s statement, “And [then] you leave and you realize the grass isn’t greener on the other side” encapsulates the resolve of her peers to honor the code of collectivity and return to the familiar small town cultural life. Jessica and Leah both privilege family and the code of “returning,” favoring coming home to the small town over the college life. Jessica prefers the family collectivity of the community, insisting:

I can't imagine life without the small town. I moved away for about a year and a half when I was at college. And I only lived at college in the city for like—I came home most of the weekends anyways. And I just hated it down there. I mean it was alright, but I like this kind of life, probably just because I grew up in it and lived on the farm.

While one might argue that Jessica did not give the city life a chance, I would assert that she was enacting the code of “returning” similarly found in Leah’s narrative. Leah admits:

But I’m like I’m probably like the worse example of a college student ever. I came home every weekend. And I shouldn’t have. Looking back on it maybe I would have loved [college] a little bit more if I was there. But I loved being home so much more. I was so afraid I would miss [family events]. . . Then my mom got [sick] and so school wasn’t a priority. Being at school and having those friends from [college] wasn’t as much of a priority as being at home with family. Friends are friends, but family will be there forever. You know? So I guess I was gone, but I was like a suitcase student. I’m sure that was a bad example.

Amidst assumptions that young people leave for college and beyond, becoming bound and defined by an identity related to experiences and ideas that arise in cultural spaces outside the rural community, young people interviewed resolve that who they are and where they look forward to “returning” indefinitely remains the “town family,” the cultural space of previous generations where “everybody knows everybody.” Within narratives young adults concentrate their identity in the small town as encapsulations of an essential or true self and the meaning of the community in their lives. When asked what the community means to him Dan says, “It means a lot in the sense that this is where I live. This is life. And this is—me. This is me. You know? This is what I’m doing.” Even though Alicia lives away from the community statements garnered throughout her interview elucidate the importance of the collective orientations to community life in her identity, professing:

- “I mean home is where your heart is. For me it’s just where family is and this is where everybody is. Coming home is coming home.”
- “It’s home home.”
- “It’s where you grew up. It’s part of you.”
- “You always have connections through memories and background, your history. You always take that with you.”

- “So that’s the traditions. Just—history. I mean it’s just that’s it’s where you grew up. That is my history. It’s where I’ve been. It’s where I’ve come from.”

Instead of discussing experiences in terms of liminality, the narratives of young people who return to the community after leaving possess focality, a term borrowed from geography.

Focality is defined as:

The characteristic of a place that follows from its interconnections with more than one other place. When interaction within a region comes together at a place (i.e., when the movement focuses on that location), the place is said to possess “focality” (Birdsall & Florin, 1998, n.p.).

Focality denotes a connection to one’s locality that induces positive appraisal and emanates interlocutors’ sense of identity. Discourse “comes together at a place” or coalesces around the community as interlocutors consistently return to express the value of the community in their lives as they are “coming to terms” with the cultural code of “returning.” All interlocutors discursively construct the focal point of their identity as the community. Although they leave and have connections to other places, those networks are considered less important; the community is the grounding focal point in their lives. Focality becomes highlighted in shared group identity. Young people who come back to be around family and friends are situated as always and forever a part of the community, honoring not only the collective past but also the desire to be part of the present and contribute to the future of the community. They privilege family and community over college experience and life elsewhere. Community members construct focal identities of young people by discursively situating young people’s identities as related to the community (i.e., in-group identity) rather than focusing on one’s life outside the community (i.e., out-group identity) even if that alterior identity is acknowledged.

Code of Recognition: Liminality and Returning

While interlocutors do not explicitly discuss liminality, their discourses speak to liminal experiences of young people who leave the community and come back to visit. These discourses discuss the impact of an autonomous college narrative and the collectivistic narrative of community membership on young adults who leave to attend college and do not return to live. An inherent contradiction arises in cultural codes of “going” and “staying” as young people attempt to honor the practices of going to college while staying connected to the community. When discussing the expectation of going off to college during a member check interview Nicole states the contradictory “norm/tradition,” contending:

Because that’s the norm, especially in small-town [state name]—it’s what you’re expected to do. You know you go to college, get a job, find a future spouse, get married, settle down, have kids, and start the whole cycle over again. It’s traditions [*sic*] based. And that’s what the tradition is—you go to college.

While Nicole’s reaction to the narrative sees nothing contradictory, hers and similar narratives begin to construct the code of recognition, a code enacted in moments of return. The code of recognition allows young people who have left the community to acknowledge their collective affinity for the community by maintaining the values they were socialized with and continuing their relationships with the “town family” in the cultural space of generations. The code of recognition is performed by community members who continue to recognize young people when they return, situating them in the community through expressions of care and interest in their young adults’ autonomous lives outside the community. In the end, community members continue to recognize young people who leave and return to the community as members of the community, and young adults who leave continue to recognize the importance and impact of the community on their lives. That said, the code of recognition acknowledges the importance of individual autonomy.

Sandra encapsulates negotiations of liminality among young people, of being “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969, p. 95) codes of autonomy and collectivity in more thoroughly detailed narratives. In Sandra’s initial interview she discusses the tension of living so close to family, saying:

It’s a balance of you know they love you, but I also know too that sometimes you have to learn to be your own boss. And sometimes you have to disappoint people and not do everything they say to jump to and do what you think you have to do.

In these statements Sandra asserts the importance of finding autonomy echoed in her later discussion of the importance of education and raising children who believed that “they could do anything in the world if they put their mind to it and they wanted to bad enough,” a narrative constructed around complex cultural ideologies of independence and hard work. In her member check regarding young people leaving Sandra characterizes her beliefs, saying, “Let’s put it this way, I think every parent hopes their kid will do better than them. And in this day and age you need some kind of education.” Education does not mean that young people forget their connections to the community. In regards to her own children Sandra is adamant in her first interview:

I wish they were closer, but I want them to be happy. And I guess maybe the big thing there is that I don’t care if you’re in Timbuktu if you still remember that you have a brother and a sister. And you give them that space, . . . [but you remember] that family means something. . . . I don’t think they have to farm to do [that]. I want them to do what they want to do.

As the mother of successful children who do not live close Sandra honors their autonomy, concluding in the follow-up member check, “Every generation if their parents really truly care about their kids wants them to do better than they did, or wants them to do what makes them happy.” Sandra’s statement about hoping her children find happiness demonstrates individualistic notions of personal happiness, yet embedded within is a hope that her children

return and an assertion that they remember the collective values of family and community. Her narrative surfaces as hope that young people come back to the community. Sandra explains:

You might be farther away, but it still brings you back if you have good memories. I don't care how far away, you still—part of you is left here.

Lydia: What does that mean—part of you is left here?

Sandra: Memories. I guess you know. It's a bond I guess you carry with you. It's probably something kind of engrained in you. It's part of who you are. How you got up. Your experiences and stuff. You know? It could be good and it could be bad. Hopefully it's more good than bad. I also think it's part of a parent saying it's all right to leave. When you tie someone down—you know—even though you don't think you're doing it, you can do more damage sometimes. And it's hard for parents to let go sometimes. You know? Yeah. I can see this community, but to say that my kids aren't still part of the community—no—they are in their own little way. They're not here. I think you know where you're at. You take part of that with you if you are experiencing some good. If they aren't good you don't want to take that with you. And I think you take it with you. I think that part of a small town that you trust each other and you help each other out.

Out of Sandra's narratives arises a hope that young people might return as they come to recognize the value of the collectivity in their lives; until then the respect for collective is kept alive in their current autonomous lives. Regardless of whether they live nearby Sandra's children are still a part of the community through memories. In her response to how long she has lived in the community during her initial interview Sandra includes a brief anecdote that seems misplaced. However, after interpreting her later narratives of “going” and “returning” practices among her own children I now understand the poignancy of her comments. Sandra observes that “you mature,” extending:

You see ideals through eyes of high school/college kids, a young person. You know the older you get your ideals change. It's like building a house. . . . A good example is talking to my son [who] mentioned he wanted—if he had to build a house when we built [our floor plan was] “too open, too open.” He wanted more closed spaces and all this stuff and privacy and all this stuff. And I was just recently talking to him this holiday and he mentioned that if he built he would like the openness too. It's maturity. And part of your history and part what you want out of life.

In other words, one comes to value community over privacy as they get older. Hope is kept alive in her last statement on the topic during the member check:

And sometimes you know, 40, 50 year old people decide they don't want the rat race. I remember talking to people in their 70s and hell their 40, 50 year old kids are coming back to the farm. They've had enough—they've probably made good too. And they want to settle down. Whether ours do? Well remains to be seen.

Sandra concludes reflecting on the loss of young people in her member check interview:

It's kind of a vicious cycle. You don't want to say you can't be smart or you can't go away from home, because you have to leave them have that choice. But you'd hope that in time maybe being closer to home isn't so bad, but if they're in an occupation where close to home there is not occupation [they could not come back anyway].

Sandra's hope is embodied in the John's personal experience as someone who left and returned. John narrates the practical hope of "returning" when he says:

[W]e were [in the city] for 15 years before we decided to move back. So there's a lot more people who probably did move away and never came back, or just to visit on weekends or special occasions. But then you're finding more and more people . . . after a few years of live in the city and you know doing that life, they realize it's a lot nicer back in the small town.

John shares with me that when he was in high school, "I kind of thought that I was going to stay here because I wanted to become a farmer." His plans were changed as he tells me that in the early 1980s "my father told me, 'You're not going to make it farming so you might as well go to college and look at another career.' . . . At that point I didn't realize I'd be moving back." John and his family's decision to move back was motivated by a need to keep the family's century-farm in the family when his parents reached an age they could no longer live there. He shares his pride while sitting in the kitchen of the house he grew up in, reflecting:

I grew up here. . . . And now I'm the proprietor here. . . . And there are days I'm . . . reminded [of] when I . . . helped my dad plant this tree, or we put this fence in. . . . And it's just like, "Wow."

With himself as an example, John narrates in his initial interview that he and his family are glad that they come back. He affirms:

Actually it was a good experience. If I would have never moved away I wouldn't have realized what I have missed and what I'm missing—you know—by not doing it. So,

maybe everyone should have that opportunity to be able to grow up in a small town, or versa vice, grow up in the city and move to a small town and then compare what their life was like, or how much different it could be.

The keys to the code of recognition is making sure that young people have positive experiences so that they will return, yet also giving them freedom to explore and have a life outside the community. Positive experiences occur first in their childhood and then later when they come back to visit and are recognized (literally) as continuous members of the community. The code of recognition is dynamic in so far as it requires young people who have left to return and to articulate their acknowledgment of the collective values of the community. In other words, the community gives young people the freedom to leave and hopes they will come back and young people come back to visit, acknowledging the importance of their past even if they are not soon to return to the community to live. The code of recognition realizes that two cultural codes are at play and that if sustaining the community is going to work these codes have to work together. The annual picnic event becomes the embodiment of the code of recognition coming into play to sustain the community.

The Picnic: Exemplifying the Code of Recognition

Tradition holds that the small rural community of study hosts a parish picnic¹ each summer. The event is the primary fundraiser for the church, bringing together people from surrounding communities as well as many individuals who grew up in the community and return with their own families to celebrate the annual weekend festivities with extended family and friends. Nicole provides a detailed description of the picnic events, narrating:

Every year we have a big church gathering. It's almost like a big town gathering too where everybody gets together and we have balloons set up for all the little kids and a beer garden for the adults. And there's like things like paddles where the elderly can go. I don't know what the guys do, I guess. But women have this whole quilt thing and they make all these little arts and crafts. There's bingo. So there's just kind of something for everybody. And we have a giant auction where people from the entire community, the

entire county and then some, offer stuff to auction off to help raise money for the church and for the town. It's just like a great big party where everybody gets together. We've got a giant dinner where we bring in a good meal and everybody can go there and eat. And there's also the hamburger stand for the kids that don't want to eat the fancy meal. Like me! And just—I don't know—a time when everybody gets together and we just kind of have a big festivity. . . . They're always in the summer. They always stay the same weekend. It's just something you plan on doing every year. And everybody knows when it is and everybody goes.

Like Nicole, interlocutors are proud of the picnic event and look forward to it every summer. They realize the importance of the picnic for securing the financial future of the community; people are generous to give their time and financial support as is expected in the small town discourses of collectivity. One of the most important events at the picnic is the auction, a practice with its own complex cultural code. Leah explains how she perceives outsider reactions to the practices of selling rolls of toilet paper at the auction in order to articulate how willing community members are to support the parish, school, and town, positing:

It just blows their mind at auctions for the picnic that people spend hundreds of dollars on toilet paper. You know? They're just like "What a waste of money." [I] go to them "it's not." To them that's tuition for a kid to go to Catholic school or for us to get a new heater in the new building. You know what I mean? It's not a waste of money to them. But to outsiders they're just like, "What in the hell is going on?" You know what I mean? Even like my friends from college. They would come back and be like, "How much money did you say that the auction made?" . . . And they would be like, "This is crazy!" They're like, "If you had this in [a city] you wouldn't even make this much money."

Leah establishes that community support in a small town is not only based in a sense of belonging and care but also through financial support. Beyond rolls of toilet paper, I noted in participant observations other auction items include: "gift certificates, oil changes, steaks, 50 lbs. [bags] of seed corn, grain hauling services, bird baths, \$100 bills, strawberry jam, homemade schnapps, and 225 other items." In Leah's experience people who are not from the small town find it difficult to understand how a night of auctioning off such items brings people together and makes money for the community. For someone not from the community "coming to terms" with

the cultural code of the picnic and its auction is perplexing, yet to someone from the community individuals paying twice as much as a bird bath is worth or purchasing a jar of jam for a double-digit price tag is a typical picnic practice. To summarize the sentiment of her narrative, Leah remarks, “People . . . want to support each other. And that’s one of the best parts . . . [I see] those same donators² that were donating when we were [kids] still donating [and buying] stuff. It’s pretty amazing.” This statement reinforces my fieldnotes when I note the possible peculiarity, although I am familiar with the practices, when “[donated] \$100 bills sell for \$200 [and] [p]eople buy [homemade] cinnamon rolls for \$40 apiece.” By focusing one’s contribution to the community’s wellbeing the code of recognition is noted in committed donating practices that declare individual and community support.

The picnic is a source of pride and a unique event to the small town community identity, a time to affirm membership and support for each other through the code of recognition. All 11 of the individuals interviewed highlight the picnic when asked about important community events in their interviews. The parish picnic is not only an important fundraising event for the community and church but more importantly is a reason to bring people together. The annual picnic is a tradition that people from the community remain committed to upholding, both for those who are “staying” and those who are “returning.” Valerie discusses the important functions of the picnic to the community, summarizing:

Well, probably the most important, in terms of keeping our community alive, is our parish picnic. That happens once a year. . . . Just because it’s our parish picnic, it’s really more of a town thing. In fact we’ve had people who live in town who aren’t members of our parish still come and volunteer to work at the picnic. So that’s critical. [The] number one [purpose is to] bring alumni and other relatives home that don’t live here. So you get a chance to see those people. And it’s also just a chance to come together and for people [from the community] to work together. And [it’s] the one time a year that everybody comes out. So, then you might see those people who don’t come to church but will still participate in those kinds of things. So that’s a big event.

Valerie illuminates the picnic's primary importance as a community fundraiser argues it more importantly functions as a tradition that motivates people to connect with the community. The picnic enacts the code of recognition that situates community membership. Individuals in the community look forward to and come to expect that many of those who have moved away will come back for the picnic weekend. Those who have left the community and return are included in the proverbial "everybody" that represents extensions of the community who gather. Following Nicole's descriptions of the picnic I ask her to elaborate on who the "everybody" is in her assertion that "everybody knows when it is and everybody goes." Nicole explains:

Well, I guess families come back, you know? If they have kids who moved away, the kids come back a lot of the time. . . . Seems like pretty much the whole surrounding area [comes too]. . . . Last year I had an aunt make a special [trip]. I mean she was here for a lot of the summer, but . . . the big reason she stayed as long as she did . . . was because of our picnic. . . . [She] wanted to be back cus she had other classmates from her graduating class come back too and she wanted to see them. . . . You know you see people you haven't seen there since they were in high school that you remember seeing when you were a little kid that come back for the picnic.

Nicole too believes that seeing family and friends is a primary function of the parish picnic. By "returning" to participate in the annual picnic tradition those who have left demonstrate a lasting commitment to the community. For Nicole's aunt "staying" longer allowed her to be around the family and friends she has not seen in a while. Nicole's example demonstrates a further commitment to "staying" connected with the rural community. Following the taxonomy "it's (like) a family" illustrated in chapter four, narratives about "returning" practices at the picnic suggest not only a commitment to visiting family and friends but to remembering where it is that you come from and continuing to be connected to that place and its people. If the community functions as a family that celebrates the homecoming of its younger generations and maintains its longstanding traditions then the picnic serves as both a reminder and a pledge for all those who have engaged practices of "staying," "going," and "returning,"

affirming that they remember where they came from through recognition and participation in the collective yet maintain personal autonomy from the community. People from the community, both those who remain and left, come to see their, as Rita said, “town family,” just as people come home to see their own immediate families.

As a key facet of the code of recognition Nicole’s narrative further illustrates the importance that “you come back” because “everybody knows everybody” and takes those relationships seriously. Later in Nicole’s interview she returns to talking about the picnic as demonstrating the practices of recognition, asserting:

I think that family is one of the biggest things we take seriously here. And people around here know who belongs to whose family. You know I can look at you know John Smith and know exactly who he belongs to and his whole chain of family. Who his cousins are, who his aunts are, and you just know that. And like—I don’t know—people go away and come back. People see people who live in the community and [they] see another family that doesn’t live in the community come back into [the community] like, for instance, [at] the parish picnic. You know people don’t know my cousins because they live in the city, yet when they come back everybody knows that they are my family. And you know? I don’t know. I think that having that support group is huge in our town.

People who do not live in the community are literally recognized as belonging in the cultural space of generations. Nicole, like many of the other interlocutors, discusses the importance of tradition and continued participation in the community. The picnic is a time for people both who live and who do not live in the community to practice recognition—of negotiating collective belonging amidst separate identities. Nicole’s comments reinforce Rita’s description of younger generations “returning” when Rita says, “it rolls to a bigger, bigger family.” Interlocutors negotiate two cultural codes, that of life inside the community and that of life outside the community. In doing so they speak of the importance of tradition and family demonstrated in people’s commitments to the annual picnic. When I ask her why she thinks they come back for the parish picnic Nicole further speculates about its importance by stating:

Been one of those things that I guess has been part of our community forever. And so they come back to see those people that they miss. And it's just kind of something that they've grown up with. It's just that tradition. And I think people, especially from [this Midwestern state], or maybe even just being from a small town, it's just we take tradition seriously. You know? I know my family doesn't take big changes well at all. We takes tradition seriously and you come back to see the people that you care about and you miss and you don't see very often because like I said before everybody is kind of a giant group of friends.

For Nicole there is no question that people from a rural community value tradition and dismiss change. People who grew up in the rural town need to return to the community and are able to take part in the continuity of lasting traditions. Alicia and Leah both affirm Nicole's assumption when they make commitments in their respective interviews to "coming back" as young people. Alicia acknowledges that she always intended to leave yet she also knew the "returning" practice when she says, "When you grow up you graduate from high school, you leave and then go to college, and then you're someplace else. And then you come back on holidays and for the picnic." Alicia "comes to terms with" what she expresses as "always coming back," the ability to return to the familiar place where she grew-up, recognizing the value of that place in her life. Similar to Nicole, Leah also discusses that her uncles, aunts, and cousins who live at a distance returning for the picnic, yet Leah makes a specific, poignant argument about the importance of the picnic to bring young people back, contending:

[The picnic is] important because when kids come back, even from college, and they're at that picnic atmosphere. . . . [T]hey're coming back and they're realizing why they—you know they realize why they love this place so much is because it's like a big family picnic. . . . And I think that's . . . important if they want to keep younger kids coming back.

The "big family picnic" is central to "coming to terms with cultures" (Philipsen, 2008) and the code of recognition. As a young person who has left the community I become one of the young people who needs to come to "realize why [I] love this place so much." In my fieldnotes during my picnic visit I noted both young people and older community members are excited that

I have returned to participate in the annual community fundraiser (among other community events). I write, “I hear my full first and last name from over my shoulder. I turn around to find a childhood friend surprised to see me. [She says,] ‘I didn’t know you were coming home.’” Later on during the picnic weekend I note, “Several people recognize me and say hello, especially older residents of the town. I hear such kind words as, ‘It’s nice that you came back for the picnic.’” I relish in being recognized and enjoy answering question about my life away.

As Nicole attests in her member check, paralleling narratives from her initial interview:

Coming back—it’s like you family—so everybody sees you again. You’re welcomed back with such open arms. I don’t know if I said this the last time, but one of my favorite things was coming back from college and you could walk like three steps and you would have to stop and have another half hour conversation with the next person that you saw. Everybody cares. Everybody wants to know. It’s important for them to see you again, to know that they haven’t forgotten about them. People stop and talk and they all have a million questions and it’s the same ones over and over again, but it’s just nice to know that somebody cares. And that they haven’t forgotten about you.

As Leah argues, young people need to return to remain connected to the community and as Alicia attests, “nothing here ever changes.” Tradition brings young people back for the picnic.

During the first night of the picnic I record interactions with another childhood friend, observing:

My friend and I stand [on the street] . . . in front of church. We talk about how in a small town everybody knows everything about you and how you are related to many of the people in town. When you move away you still know a lot about people and their pasts, but you miss out on some of the more recent gossip. She says, “You’re always a part of this town.” Soon she follows up with “I wouldn’t miss the picnic,” [meaning she would never want to miss attending the picnic].

Soon our conversation switches to weddings. She looks at me and says, “This is where it should be,” meaning this is the church she wants to get married in. I probe conversationally. For her this is the church she grew up as well as where her parents, several aunts and uncles, both grandparents and two of her four great-grandparents, one maternal and one paternal were married.

In the first part of this interaction my friend and I both reminisce and recognize our continued membership in the community despite our lack of physical residence. We enact a code of recognition by focusing our identities on the community space. Even though neither of

us lives in the community she and I both make our commitment by attending the weekend festivities. Her words, “You’re always part of this town” further situates her and I in the focality of our pasts as our shared experience of growing-up in the community becomes ever more salient in the moment. My friend’s enactment of the code of recognition is ever more apparent in her verbal commitment to return for the picnic and in her resolve that this is the community where she wants to get married even though she now lives elsewhere.

The picnic even plays into future planning to come back to the community. When asking Alicia if she would still visit the community if her family was not present, she avows:

But I mean if we were talking say twenty years down the road and grandparents are gone and if our parents ever moved away, probably not as often as I do now. You know. I would come home for the picnic because that’s a huge deal and it’s still like—you know it just is. But I can’t foresee other reasons to come home other than to just visit. Which I mean I would still do, but you know probably not nearly as often.

Following the cultural code of recognizing the importance of the collective in her life Alicia asserts that she would come to visit even if her immediate family connections were no longer present. A later narrative from her interview helps to further situate and name her motivations as she describes having “your history” in the community. While initially describing the community musicals that used to occur, which were mentioned by four of the other interlocutors as well, Alicia describes the importance of being a part of a history greater than herself, giving an example that related back to the community picnic. She first describes the community musicals, saying:

They would come together as a town to put on the show. You know this. But you know that could be part of other people’s history. But I think it’s different because it’s the whole town that kind of all came together and did this. You know where as if you did it somewhere else in a bigger city like [where I live] it’s people who have those common interests and hobbies and want to do this. I mean that was a part of it, but it was so big. I mean everybody helped out and did it. Everybody was part of it. It was a community theater. It wasn’t just a “oh we’re going to do this kind of thing.” And then you know the picnic is the same. It’s coming together for the church. You know? It’s a fundraiser.

So that's the traditions. Just—history. I mean it's just—that's—it's where you grew up. That is my history. It's where I've been. It's where I've come from. So I mean I can't— It's not different I guess. But it's different in the way that everybody's history is different.

Even though Alicia has left the community she remains a part through participating in the traditions and situating her own history in the community. She plans to return to the community for the picnic for years to come. However, Chris realizes that the picnic may not continue on forever when he shares with me, as someone who also attends the parish picnic, his lament about there not being many young people in the community, noting:

When you go, or when we set up the stands and stuff for the picnic. It—They're older guys [who are doing the work]. Like Jim Thomas, for instance, is the person that came to my head. Those guys ain't no spring chickens anymore. And that's what probably 60 percent of it is. And you know, so there I am and I see this. And there I am. But there are younger guys in their thirties. Like—Matt Smith. Or my brother. He's twenty-eight. But you know there [we] are. But us guys are way outnumbered by them guys that have been doing this for years, the older generation. So, it's just like—to me knowing that I'm going to stay around here. It's scary of what's going to happen in 10 to 15 years when all those guys—you know—[are] not able to do it anymore.

Lydia: So what do you think will happen in 10 to 15 years?

Chris: I just think the population will be either close to what it is or smaller. And like as far as the parish picnic, one of the biggest events for the community. I honest don't they're going to, in 10-15 years they might not be happening. Would you agree with me, or what do you think about that? . . . I just think it's going to go to where everybody in the community, or [whoever] wants to, they have like an auction and people donate whatever. . . . [T]his older generation . . . [might] not able to work or set up for it, work it. I mean . . . it takes a lot of people to do something like that. And if the people aren't there I don't know what they'll do. What's your feelings on that?

Lydia: I think it's something to be concerned about—to be scared about. I know. I mean—Well, I'm still in school so I haven't moved away, but I kind of have.³ But I also come back whenever I can. And I'm also here in the summer and stuff. So I really feel connected to this community and I feel like I also will be. I don't know if I will always live here. But I'll always kind of live here because I will always be a part of it I think. But I do get concerned that like you said, about there not being any younger generation—

Chris: Yeah.

Lydia: —to keep things going. You see the age of the people who are responsible for the picnic and working funerals. Now all these people are going [south for the winters].

Chris: I know it.

Lydia: And they're just not here.

Chris: I know it. Yeah.

As I speak with young people we all engage in our own “coming to terms with cultures,” (Philipsen, 2008) with the realizations that while very little seems to change in our hometown, life still changes. Amidst the transitions we all find our own ways of asserting our care and commitment. In the rural community studied the picnic is central to coming to terms with the presence of two complex cultural codes. The picnic allows those who engage in “staying” as well as those who enact “going” and “returning” practices to continue to care about the community that they hold so dear. Like the community chorus shows that ended, someday the picnic could end, and yet even Chris believes that people will continue to make the picnic experience happen. Such hope recognizes the importance of engaging a cultural code that honors collectivity yet must address the implications of autonomous narratives that take young adults away from the community.

Chapter Conclusion

While interlocutors do not explicitly discuss multiple cultural codes in their lives and while they give precedence to the collective code, they also give further credence to individuality and the need to go to college among young people. The complexity of cultural codes is noted in the ways they “come to terms with” collectivistic and individualist orientations in the code of recognition. I asserted in chapter one that for individuals who negotiate the tension of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” a study of communication offers an opportunity to “come to terms with” the multiple cultural codes of community membership. Practices of visiting and moving home among young people demonstrate an affinity for and commitment to maintaining caring and supportive relationships with community members and peers who return for community rituals/traditions. The town picnic is central to “coming back” practices and “coming to terms with cultures” (Philipsen, 2008). Such practices allow young people to experience a sense of

belonging and community membership and for community members to remain connected to their young people while respecting their autonomous space.

Endnotes

¹ Community members use the term “parish picnic” and “picnic” synonymously. I tend to simply call it “the picnic.”

² Leah uses the term “donator,” not “donor.”

³ Chris’s interview immediately followed Nicole’s interview. In her interview she assesses my identity/community membership as negotiable due to my status as a college student. I would assert that her narrative was on my mind when I made this claim to situate my relationship to the community.

Chapter Six

*Well, I was born in a small town/ And I live in a small town . . .
All my friends are so small town/My parents live in the same small town . . .
Educated in a small town/Taught to fear Jesus in a small town . . .
No, I cannot forget from where it is that I come from/ I cannot forget the people who love me.
Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town/ And people let me be just what I want to be . . .
Got nothing against the big town . . .
But my bed is in a small town./Oh, and that's good enough for me.
Well, I was born in a small town/ And I can breathe in a small town.
Gonna die in a small town/ Ah, that's prob'ly where they'll bury me.
—“Small Town,” (Mellencamp, 1990, track 2).*

Somewhere in the middle of the U.S. landscape arises a small town familiar to a relatively few number of individuals, a cultural space of seeming insignificance to mass society. Yet to people who identify with this locale, the rural community becomes something more than a dot on map. The rural small town is a community, a united “town family” where belonging is co-constructed by the reality that “everybody knows everybody” and has known everybody for generations. While a highly cohesive community exists premised on collectivistic notions of care and support, an individualistic narrative surrounding the necessary college education and the reality that young people must leave the community to perform culturally-situated educational practice arises in discourse. The community of study, while a specific unnamed location, comes to represent a symbolic location of cultural negotiations between young people and community members. As this thesis project comes to a close I reflect back on the substantive responses to my research questions, the theoretical extensions and responses to the principle exigencies for my project, the limitations of and future directions for research, the implications of my own relationships to the community and practices of “staying,” “going,” and “returning,” and the contributions of this research/thesis to ethnographic studies on U.S. American speech communities (Philipsen, 1975) and “coming to terms with cultures” (Philipsen, 2008).

Research Questions and Conclusions

The first of the three research questions addressed in this project asks:

RQ 1: How do people in a rural community make sense of young people's (i.e., 18-30 years of age) practices of staying, leaving, and returning to their hometown?

Chapter three broadly engages 11 narratives—six from young people and five from community members—as they discuss “staying,” “going,” and “returning” decisions among younger generations. Young people narrate the pinnacle moment of high school graduation as a catalyst opportunity to leave the community. They also discuss the importance of returning to the community to visit during the time that young people are away at college in order to stay connected with family and community. Jessica characterizes her relationships in the community as “close and personal,” elaborating, “I mean they really care about what you do in your life and what you’re doing, how you’re doing, and if they can help you in any way. . . . I really like that.” Short-term visits contribute to long-term “returning” practices for some young people, who express an affinity for small town life. Community members negotiate practices of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” through discourses centered on giving young people the freedom to leave the community. They further realize that the reality of careers and other opportunities elsewhere means that many of their children are only able to return to visit. Rita calls these visiting practices “heart-warming,” saying, “people are really excited to see you young people come back.” While community members express a desire for younger generations to live closer to their hometown, they come to terms with young people leaving the community by situating them as contiguous members of the small town “family” through the maintenance of shared socialized values and continued care for the community.

Chapter four takes up the second research question, which asks:

RQ 2: What are the localized taxonomy of terms (Hymes, 1974) used by participants to describe the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning?”

Augmenting overarching discursive themes discerned in chapter three, three unique, interconnected taxonomies develop in participants’ narratives. While “you come back,” “it’s (like) family,” and “everybody knows everybody” do not replace researcher designated terms of “staying,” “going,” and “returning,” interlocutor appropriated terms further nuance the ways of speaking about the phenomenon of study. “You come back” explicates the collective notions of support and belonging that prompt young people to return, either to visit or to live, offering a pledge that no matter what happens and where individuals go young people will return to their hometown both as a familiar, comforting space and in a commitment to deep-seated values and ways of living. Each interlocutor describes at some level the “coming back” practices of either themselves as young people, or the parallel “returning” of friends and family, classmates and children. “It’s (like) a family” introduces a familial analogy enacted to characterize relationships between and among people from the community. Interlocutors consistently operationalize this metaphor/simile to define relationships similar to that of their own family, who also happen to primarily reside in the community. Because the small town as a cultural space is established on generations of family residing in the same community the metaphor/simile is not far off from the reality that many people are related. Chris summarizes life in a small town saying, “Well, everybody knows everybody. . . . If I don’t know you [and] we start talking, it’s ‘Who are you? Who do you belong to?’” “Everybody knows everybody” augments the previous taxonomies, explicating an inherent tension between community familiarity, care, and support and individual privacy and autonomy. Interlocutors’ negotiations of “everybody knows everybody” in contrast to “everybody knows your business” reveal tensions between autonomy and togetherness as interlocutors personally and collectively engage in coming to terms with “staying,” “going,” and

“returning.” Ultimately, collective orientations towards family are privileged in motivating “staying” and “returning” practices. During member check questions regarding “everybody knows everybody” Nicole surmises, “It’s [*sic*] got its ups and downs in that area. There are things you want people to know and you have things that you want to keep private. Sometimes though private things become public and they spread like wildfire.” She goes on to conclude, “But for the most part I would say it’s positive.”

The final research question speaks to the cultural complexities of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” practices among young people, asking:

RQ 3: What do participant discourses reveal about “coming to terms with cultures” (Philipsen, 2008)—the negotiation of two or more cultural codes in one’s life?

While informants are reluctant to discuss multiple cultural codes of “staying,” “going,” and “returning,” an underlying tension arises in their narratives; how can the cultural code of collectivity, or code of “staying,” be maintained when an individualistic narrative, or code of “leaving,” is appropriated? While the default trajectory of “schooling” and jobs elsewhere explains why some young people leave indefinitely, young people’s narratives are supplanted by their overarching commitments to stay and contribute to the community. Even after leaving for college Leah proclaims, “[This community] still runs deep in everybody’s blood.” Instead of focusing on the liminal experience interlocutors elect to speak primarily to their small town identities. They create a code of recognition that acknowledges the requisite need for education beyond high school, a need that means young people must leave and perhaps will relocate, while firmly grounding the code of recognition in the collective role of family and community in one’s life. In chapter five the term “focality” is introduced as an alternative to liminality in the code of “returning.” Focality of community identity privileges the code of small town life noted as interlocutors make marked contrasts to life elsewhere. These contrasts are exemplified in Dan’s

narrative from the initial interview as he comes to terms with life outside the community. He articulates that at college he “liv[ed] next to somebody and [did] not know who they [were] and what they [did].” Dan finds it “kind of weird to me” that they “wouldn’t want to talk,” saying, “I would go out of my way to try talking to somebody and they think that you’re priding [*sic*] in on their privacy or something. I was just trying to be nice.” He concludes, “It’s like people don’t want you to know them, even though you’re surrounded by strangers I guess.”

The code of recognition exists as a code honoring both individual autonomy and collective respect and acknowledgment. The annual town picnic serves a case study event to see and hear the code of recognition in practice. Valerie attests that the “number one [purpose of the parish picnic is to] bring alumni and other relatives home that don’t live here. So you get a chance to see those people. And it’s also just a chance to come together and for people to work together.” In other words, the picnic allows those who left the community an opportunity to return in order to remain connected to the collective despite carrying on separate lives from the small town.

Theoretical Implications

The exigency for my thesis project resides not only in a need to study the U.S. American, Midwestern rural small town as a unique and complex cultural space, but also in requisite awareness and subsequent inquiry into the discursive explanations for why young people elect to stay, leave, and return to the rural community where they grew up. Understanding the critical juncture of “staying” and “going” is imperative to understanding the juncture’s impact on people and their way of life. While often the logic of youth migration focuses on the lack of jobs and other opportunities as well as young peoples’ aspirations to leave the community, the narratives explored in this project provide collective and relationally focused motivations for “staying”

“going,” and “returning.” Young people leave the rural community for educational and career reasons; however, this does not mean they deny the impact of the community on their lives or that the community ceases to have an interest in the lives of younger generations.

First, the themes and taxonomies developed throughout this research nuance earlier scholarship and taxonomies (see Ford *et. al.*, 1997; Ní Laoire, 2000; Jamieson, 2000; Stockdale, 2002; Carr and Kefalas, 2006/2009). Instead of focusing on labeling individuals according to researcher defined classifications such as “Stayers,” “Achievers,” “Seekers,” “High-Flyers,” and “Boomerangs” (Carr and Kefalas, 2009), or “committed leavers,” “reluctant leavers,” “committed stayers,” and “reluctant stayers” (Ford *et. al.*, 1997), this thesis focuses on developing the shared meaning attached to localized terms for migration practices. This research broadens scholarly conversations beyond the individual to the community level. In this way, the study moves away from discourses implicating the onus of decision making on young people and providing definitive categories to name their experiences. Personal narratives situate practices within community discourses and larger cultural narratives about the transition into adulthood and the values of rural small town life. More importantly, developing taxonomies from participant discourse allows for considering the position of individuals who hold more liminal relationships to “going” and “returning.” Therefore, I am not concerned with naming an overarching socio-cultural imperative (e.g., economic, educational, political). Rather, I am interested in what informants’ personal narratives reveal *in situ* about overarching internally and externally influential cultural narratives. The study then takes a discursive approach to studying “cultures of migration” (Boyle, Halfacree, & Robinson, 1998, p. 207).

Second, this thesis project makes direct and lasting impacts on the study of specific speech codes and unique speech communities. Throughout analysis I explore the ways that

codes of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” are socially constructed in participant discourse. Inherent within these discourses is a privileging of collectivistic orientations to community life that are historically situated in a speech community where generations of family members have resided. Hence, the entirety of this project has sought to discover the localized terms for talking about the phenomenon of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” among young people and the cultural premises and meanings attached to the significance of these practices as they become negotiated by young people and community members alike. The focus on a rural U.S. American speech community and subsequent findings complicate current assumptions about U.S. American cultural codes regarding individuality/collectivity as well as rural/suburban/urban cultural premises. I discover through analysis that these culturally constructed dichotomizing narratives must not be regarded as mutually exclusive but rather exist in a dynamic interplay of discursive negotiation. Theoretically, this ethnographic study contributes to further discussions regarding the codes of honor and dignity (Philipsen, 1992) with the addition of the liminal and focal code of recognition. Furthermore, theoretical adaptation of focality as a conceptual framework for nuancing discussions of salience and performance contributes to the larger body of intercultural communication research on identity. In the end, this thesis contributes to a larger body of communication studies scholarship that commenced in 1975 with Philipsen’s call for additional “descriptive and comparative studies of American speech communities” (p. 22). Shaped by Hymes’s (1972/1974) *Ethnography of Communication* as a methodological approach, my research contributes to Philipsen’s disciplinary edict and broader conversations of intra/inter/co/cross-cultural communication practices, or ways of speaking.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the richness of narrative research material and participant observations this thesis study is limited by time and distance. First, more time would have allowed me to expand the total number of interlocutors included. With that, a particular voice is missing from the study: the young person who left, did not return to the community, lives at a greater distance, and is in a career path that would make it difficult to ever return. Recruiting this demographic is difficult because their individual practices of returning to the community occur on a limited frame. Second, my own distance from the community of study limited my access to participants as I was only able to enter the field and conduct interviews during my own academic breaks. This further limited my ability to member check all participants and condensed my timeline for conducting interviews, which had to be carefully scheduled around interlocutors' holiday plans with family.

These limitation, however, provide avenues for future research. First, future studies could expand to include the voice of individuals who represent the more liminal voices of young adults who leave the community and only return to visit. Second, exploring the implications of relatively similar cultural positions (i.e., ethnicity, social class, and religious affiliation) on “everybody knows everybody” would further nuance understanding the term's appropriation. While not discussed within the bounds of the guiding research questions, young people and community members speak to the importance of shared religious identity contributing to community cohesion. Moreover, people from the community inhabit relatively similar master statuses in relation to socio-economic status and ethnicity, which have direct implications on requisite college education narratives in the broader U.S. American context. Third, the culturally situated, ordered tradition, which was first noted by Carr and Kefalas (2009) and affirm by

Nicole, of graduate, get a job, get married, and start a family may additionally complicate how “schooling” allows for preempting, or perpetually putting on hold engaging in these traditional practices. Fourth, the code of recognition introduced in chapter five demands further exploration as a unique cultural code that represents the collision and collusion of Philipsen’s (1992) codes of honor and dignity. Furthermore, the concept of “focality” complicates discussions of identity salience, liminality, and hybridity in intercultural communication studies research. Finally, the localized taxonomy of terms developed in chapter four provides a basis for further exploring the cultural codes of the rural small town as a unique cultural space of study. In the end, “coming to terms with cultures” as enacted in the rural community requires thoughtful analysis and reflection on collectivity and autonomy, a discussion that moves beyond dichotomies of small town versus city life. This thesis is only a steppingstone to studying complexities of cultural life in an underappreciated and threatened U.S. American locale—the rural small town.

Researcher Positionality

Many graduate students would affirm the adage that “your thesis is your life,” meaning that your thesis is the document that gets you out of bed in the morning, keeps you awake at night, and quickly becomes your only conversational topic with friends and family. However, the converse is also true for me. That is, “my life is my thesis.” I am a young person who lives/performs/experiences the title of my thesis, “coming to terms with ‘staying,’ ‘going,’ and ‘returning’” on a frequent basis. In chapter two I address my own relationship to the community of study and the phenomenon of interest, articulating the challenges and benefits to research practices. I note, “I would qualify to be a participant in my own research.” After completing the collection of interview materials *in situ*, transcribing interviews, analyzing narratives, memoing themes in response to research questions, and drafting analysis chapters I came to know the

narratives of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” in nuances I had yet to consider. In this process I also critiqued myself based on my ability to code-shift between the codes of the rural community I grew up in and the codes of the ethnographer of communication in interviews and the writing process. And at times I found myself having emotional moments of identification as I “snuggled with my data”¹ on Friday nights in my favorite high school sweats.

Throughout the thesis process I remained committed to maintaining my interpretative researcher identity and voice. Ultimately though, in research centered on young people from a rural community “going” and “returning” my own personal practices and experiences are implicated, specifically when my identity is positioned in interviews or my orientations to life inside and outside the community are challenged as I analyze transcripts. In the end, my interlocutors remind me that I belong to this community too. In this section I reflect on moments in interviews where my own practices of “going” and “returning” become the topic of conversation. In these moments the themes discussed by interlocutors became embodied in their inquiries and positioning of me as part the young adult cohort.²

Community members, particularly Rita and Sandra, colloquially reference me as a young person from the community. For instance, Rita aligns me with the research, contending, “Like for instance—like you. You’re away and you come back.” However, young people interviewed move beyond the obvious corollary. After asking herself an impactful rhetorical question and asserting her definitive response (i.e., “And how are we supposed to keep as strong community when all the young people keep leaving? So, I’d never leave.”) I ask Nicole, “So, how do you feel about the [young] people leaving?” Feeling somewhat what personally implicated, Nicole culls my dissonance momentarily, explaining:

It's not like they don't want to come back, or they wouldn't be proud to come back. It's just they can't help it. . . . But [I] can't blame'em. They come back to visit, so it's okay. Like you, right? [Laughing].

Nicole positions me as proud of where I am from and directly implicates that I must come back to visit. I respond, "Right? So, you consider me someone who's [*sic*] left?" A complex and at times contradictory narrative transpires as Nicole seeks to situate my own membership in the community. Nicole responds to my question, "You're out right now³. You're . . . states away. So not necessarily left because you're still in school. Like if you go to work in California you know I'll consider that you left. [Laughing]." As I ask myself whether or not she thinks I have interminably left or not, Nicole resolves:

So [I do] not necessarily consider you left, but you're just continuing your education and then I don't know what you'll do.

Lydia: So, because I'm still in school does that make me more part of the community?

Nicole: Yeah. You haven't left yet.

As I probe further to understand the implication of physical presence and college she draws on her sister to further complicate discussion, saying:

I mean [being] states apart is different from being miles apart. Well like Kathleen, my older sister. She's in [graduate] school, so she's been up there for almost eight years now in [College Town]. And that's like a three hour drive. She never comes home because she's so busy. So, in a sense I'd consider her kind of gone, but not really too. She's kind of in your boat. [Laughing].

I ask Nicole, "How come you don't quite consider her gone?" Nicole responds, "Well technically she's still getting her schooling. I don't know. She just—I kind of forget she's there sometimes. [Laughing]. I don't know. Sometimes I forget I have an older sister, she's gone so much." Nicole makes an intriguing commentary about the dichotomy of remembering and forgetting that brings our discussion back to visiting practices. I ask Nicole whether the frequency of visits matters. She responds:

So like if somebody comes back every other weekend. . . . Maybe even once a month. That's more than my sister comes back, so I'd consider them still here. But if somebody doesn't come back for four months, like my sister, then she's left, though still part of the community, cus she's never here. So it depends on how often they come back.

Although I am ethnographically interested in Nicole's schema of proximity, "schooling," and frequency of visiting as key considerations for how a young person who is "out right now" is positioned as a continuous member of the community, admittedly she is talking to me directly as a peer. Ironically, which I would conjecture Nicole did not realize, at the time of our interview it had been just beyond four months to the day since I had last returned to the community.

Amalgamating the phrases, Nicole asserts that "though still part of the community" "if somebody doesn't come back for four months" "then [they have] left [because they are] never here."

Therein is my answer: I am part of the community, but I have left. However, I come back to visit, demonstrating that I am still proud of my past. Nicole will get back to me on my status once I am done with school, decide what state I am going to live in, and make sure to visit every 15 weeks.⁴

I have argued throughout the thesis for the importance of "returning" visits and the discourses constructing young people as contiguous members of the community. Nicole's narrative situates me in my own research as someone who is still a member of the community. I become undeniably interwoven in her assignment of meaning and community membership. While Nicole is concerned with situating me in the community, Chris and Dan take the opportunity when I ask if they have further questions at the end of their interviews to ask me questions about why I elected to move to Colorado and what my life is like in there. Like the way that older generations take interest in young people who come back, Chris and Dan take an interest in my own narrative. In these interactions I am aware of how my own community identification is underscored. Although for the sake of length I will not take up both of the

interviewee-interviewing-interviewer-interviews, a review of some the questions asked exemplifies the points of inquiry I responded to. Chris asks:

- Do you think you would come back here?
- How much different is it as far as the lifestyle, or anything, from [the city where I went to undergraduate] to Fort Collins beings [*sic*] you moved west?
- Like a corn—like how much corn is out there, or soybeans? Is there any soybeans out there?

Dan inquires:

- How long have you been out in Colorado?
- Why did you choose Colorado though?
- But do you think that say a program would have been offered [at a closer university], do you think you would have stayed?
- And what is the program?
- And they seemed to be the best program?

In some ways I am surprised at the thoroughness of narratives considering many ideas expressed could easily be assumed to be knowledge that I would already have from experience in the community. In my interview with Alicia, however, it is our shared identity as individuals who left and longtime relationship that causes her in consternation to make me answer my own question. Earlier in our interview she describes missing home, saying:

I mean what I think I miss is when we were all home. Like when you're having a really bad day I can't just you know call up Lydia . . . and we can get together and work it out. I have to do it over the phone now. But I think that has more to do with that we are just growing up and moving away then this town. But then again at the same time I mean that was the way it was here.

Later in the interview I ask her about her comments regarding “growing up and moving away.” Alicia reiterates:

It makes you miss home. It makes you miss being able to talk to them in the same space. But at the same time—I mean in a lot of ways it's still the same. You know even if it's on the phone, you don't really feel like a whole lot has changed. You just miss being able to be in the same room.

In my ethnographer role I probe her statements to understand what she means, asking, “What makes it feel the same?” Alicia stares at me, opining, “I don’t know. It just does. It just does. I don’t know? Hmm. I don’t know! What makes it feel the same Lydia?” Following her question an extended dialogue precipitates between friends who complete each other’s sentences as a reminder that I am not simply acting as an interpretive researcher talking to interlocutors.

Perhaps these narratives exemplify why the ethnographer should not interview people they know personally. Perhaps these narratives legitimize my own motivations for studying “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” In the end, I firmly believe these interactions give voice to the reality that discourses of “staying,” “going,” and “returning” occur between and among young people and community members in everyday life. In these narratives I become an active participant in my research at the prompting of my interlocutors, or rather friends.

So, in the end, perhaps Rita is just reminding me to come back to visit. Perhaps Kate is reminding me that the small town offers many benefits to consider making my life there, even if there are moments that make you imagine living elsewhere. Perhaps John is trying to tell me that I might come back someday even if I had not considered it recently. Sandra is certainly teaching me that family knows they have to let their kids “have a life,” but it does not make it any easier on parent or child. Jessica wants me to know that kids who grow up with a small town “know how to work” and that having relationship with the older generations matters. Leah hopes I remember that in the end family is most important. And Alicia, Chris, Dan, and Nicole just wanted to know: So, how do you, Lyd, “come to terms with cultures” since you left and come back to visit sometimes?

Ethnographic Contributions

In 1975, Philipsen issued a call for additional research on U.S. American speech communities and in 2008 he followed up his call with his NCA keynote lecture entitled, “Coming to Terms with Cultures.” In that lecture he provided four circumstances that necessitate “coming to terms with cultures” (Philipsen, 2008, p. 4). They are:

1. Accomplish something in interaction with others in a milieu in which a dominant culture works against one’s purposes, or
2. Challenge or undermine a dominant culture, or
3. Integrate cultures that are critical to one identity, or
4. Reconstruct one’s life when a culture that has been a source of strength begins to crumble before one’s eyes (Philipsen, 2008, p. 3).

The ethnographic work undertaken in this project sought to “listen,” “scour the text,” “embrace nuance,” and then “talk” (Philipsen, 2008, p. 4) about the cultural complexities surrounding one rural community’s process of making meaning regarding young people’s practices of “staying,” “going,” and “returning.” In doing so, much of the discussion highlighted the third circumstance by exploring how narratives about “staying,” “going,” and “returning” develop and interact in practice. That said, all four circumstances are addressed and contribute to burgeoning contemporary ethnographic scholarship. Before walking out of this community study one must attend to the inroads from which we entered: The pragmatic reality is that the U.S. American speech community of study, also known as the rural small town, has an unsecure future. As Alicia bluntly states:

[Young people leaving] has a tendency to kill the town because most of them who move away aren’t necessarily coming back. So as the older generation starts dying off and the young generations keep leaving, there aren’t a whole lot of families . . . to keep the town going.

Therefore, in reflecting on lasting influences, the ethnographic contributions of this study have the potential to reside in the fourth circumstance. The time may come when one needs to

reconstruct a dissipating cultural code. This is not to say that one will be necessarily attempting to reconstruct a code as they experience the small town decline, although this is indeed a possibility. Rather, one may engage in a reconstruction of the rural community code as other codes of life away from the rural community seem to have lost their novelty and appropriateness in one's life. These reinvigorations of ways of speaking when it seems nearly all is lost speak directly to one's "staying" in, "going" from, and "returning" to the community throughout one's lifetime, regardless of whether these practices are engaged out of choice or necessity.

Perhaps the final result of such an endeavor seems insufficient without a practical list of communicative rules for talking about the phenomenon at hand, however that was never the intent of the project, nor within the scope of possibility when studying cultural complexity. This thesis project is nevertheless an answer to Philipsen's (2008) "formal call for such well-worked cases to be presented, . . . a case that disconfirms, fails to disconfirm, expands, contracts, or otherwise suggests improvements in the model [of coming to terms with cultures]" (p. 16). Although belated in so far as my case confirms the importance of "coming to terms with cultures" some three years after Philipsen was initially soliciting cases to be presented at National Communication Association in Chicago during the fall of 2009, my study provides "a nuance" (Philipsen, 2008, p. 16) to newly authorized collections of scholarship—ethnographic analysis of the multiplicity of cultural codes being enacted (not reacted to) in one U.S. American small town rural community.

Alternative cultural codes are impacting the rural community, and to say that this cultural space is not adapting would be an unfair assessment. While interlocutors' discourses often focused on the past, this project is about the future. That is, the future of the small town. If nothing else, this project documents and draw attention to a unique and complex cultural space

through *emic* ethnographic means. More broadly, this community study addresses a social problem with tangible economic and social impacts. Therefore, cogent contributions of this study are not codified in stagnating cultural conversations and spaces, or academic annals for that matter. This study is about the human necessity to make sense of where it is that one comes from, or rather one's home, a place embodied as a (small town rural community) space and as a complex communicative code that one forever identifies.

Underlying the *emic* contributions of this study to understanding the U.S. American speech community is the potential for *etic* discussion of rural community identity. Aoki's (1997/2000) ethnographic study of the U.S. American rural speech community elucidates the centrality of hard work, family, and religion in interlocutor discourse. Aoki's (1997/2000) research focusing on discourses of ethnic label use and Mexican-American identity took place in Biola, California, a speech community located in California's San Joaquin Valley a few thousand miles from the community of study featured in this thesis. Amidst marked regional and ethnic variability in our communities, the same three broad themes regarding work ethic, community as family, and faith (i.e., Catholicism) can be noted in interlocutor discourses. While my guiding research questions led me not to explore the more nuanced narratives of work ethic and religion in interviews and analysis, these themes along with family continued to be reiterated. Taken together, my thesis and Aoki's dissertation work provide "descriptive and comparative studies of American speech communities" (Philipsen, 1975, p. 22) that illustrate the unique complexities of U.S. American rural community identity through paralleled ways of speaking, further contributing to studying and understanding small town culture more broadly in society.

I asserted in chapter one that "communities are forgotten when they are no longer points of identification." I firmly believe through the voices of all 11 interlocutors and my interactions

in observations that the rural community has not been forgotten as a place of identification. The narratives shared by interlocutors reiterate one's primary identification with place. At the end of her member check I ask Nicole if there is anything thing else she would like to share about life in a small town. Nicole emphatically adds, "I love it! I'll summarize my view of small town life. I love it!" Kate's self-avowal as a "lifer" designates the importance of the community in her life. However, John's experience having left the community and returned best speaks to centering the rural community in one's life. Speaking to his identification with small town life, John attests, "I just can't imagine my life living in the city right now compared to what I've done in the past ten years living back in the country, or the small town. Just—I think it's changed my—my soul." A place must be pretty special to change one's "soul."

Endnotes

¹ This is my own term to characterize my passion for the process during the analysis phase, yet was also appropriated to explicate the irony and lack of socializing with fellow graduate students.

² Due to space constraints I cannot take up all the ways my identity became implicated in interviews and participant observation in the ways I may wish to discuss. Instead, I have elected to focus on exemplar moments in interactions with fellow young people.

³ It is important to note Nicole's self-avowal to understand her definition of "out right now":
So technically I had about four years where I was out, but I don't know if I really consider that being out the community. . . . I was back so often . . . I didn't get far enough away where I would spend months and months and months away. I consider that getting out of the community and living away from the community, but I never really had that.

⁴ I can only conjecture why Nicole elected to say "four months." However, in concert with her comments about "schooling" it is worth noting the underlying math of the academic calendar. First, among colleges on the semester system, the average semester lasts 16 weeks, or four months, with assumed fall and spring breaks in between. This means that even if the student does come home at the mid-semester break, they will come home for the extended break between semesters, which just so happens to correspond to Christmas, and the summer. Second, if one assumes that younger generations who live and have jobs away visit once in the summer and once at end of the year holidays, then these individuals would only be coming home twice a year. Note how these assumptions correspond to the community's practices of mass at Christmas and the annual picnic, the two outstanding events to return for according to participants' discourses. Third, students are assumed to return home for the summer, even if this does not occur in practice. Thus, "four months" carries more significance than an arbitrarily selected length of time and further explicates why "schooling" remains such an important consideration.

Afterword

The people who come to my door want help coming to terms with cultures. They bring a sense of purpose, usually an inchoate one, and a means by which to satisfy the longings they express. When I talk with them, I want to have at hand a system that names such purposes and describes the means, the modes of personal action, through which those purposes might be fulfilled. I also want to be able to tell stories of people who had such purposes as theirs, who tried to serve those purposes discursively through nameable means, and to be able to say something about the success of failures of their efforts (Philipsen, 2008, p. 16).

In the same fall semester that Gerry Philipsen coined the phrase “coming to terms with cultures” I was a junior in college “coming to terms” with my own cultural identity as an individual who grew up on a farm somewhere in “middle America” as well as my newly avowed identity as a “communication studies nerd.” I had, at the suggestion of my roommate and my advisor, enrolled in COM 244: Cross-Cultural Communication, a perplexing course with challenging readings grounded in the Ethnography of Communication, an orientation to studying human communication that seemed daunting. As I tried to make sense of our course texts in light of my own experience I came to realize I had been socialized into a unique cultural code, that of the small town/rural farm community culture. I have vivid memories of frustrations while reading Philipsen’s (1992) *Speaking Culturally* and sitting in my professor’s office trying to make sense the course and my proposed semester project. I also remember my professor’s interest in my descriptions of my hometown, one day asking me to go get coffee with him to chat after I told to him that I went home to drive a combine during my fall break. And so, despite my resistance that fall, somehow I found myself becoming an ethnographer of communication, completing my COM 244 project on a special community dinner honoring the 100th anniversary of the church building through an assessment grounded in Hymes’s SPEAKING model.

After a semester and my eventual memorization of Philipsen’s (1992) definition of “culture,” I fully intended to move on with my coursework and my life without having to make

sense of life based on “socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules (p. 7).” However, I could not deny the ways my acculturation in a place not that far from the city where I now resided had impacted my “ways of speaking.” Because of my experience growing up in a rural community I had been recommended for an internship with a non-profit community sustainability organization that traveled across the primarily rural state conducting deliberative workshops. Again, I found myself becoming the participant observer of these processes for the purposes of the internship and independent study coursework. While workshop participants could be standoffish about “city people” coming to the community as soon as my background (i.e., I went home and drove a combine over fall break.) was mentioned I had a conversational inroads based on similar experiences.

At some time during the spring semester my COM 244 professor would send me a transcript of Philipsen’s (2008) “Coming to Terms with Cultures” NCA address and I would drag the email into a folder for perusal later.

I vividly remember sitting across the table from my professor eating Pad-Thai, something I had not often eaten, and describing my internship experience when he asked “the grad school question.” I retorted and retreated. In that moment it was the summer before my senior year and I was living the ultimate liminal (even though I didn’t know the term at that point) life between my college life and my small town existence.

I would spend the fall semester “coming to terms with cultures” and making a decision about “staying” or “leaving” family, friends, my hometown, and the city that I been familiar with my entire life as the closest metropolitan area. I would continue to the retorting and retreating when ANYONE asked what I was doing after college, battling the guilt that comes from growing

up in such a family and community responsibility centered way of living (i.e., individualistic \leftrightarrow collectivistic).

Then, one cold November day walking the sidewalks of downtown Chicago alone I made the decision: “I’m going to go to Colorado State.” Perhaps it was my excitement after having had breakfast with Gerry Philipsen, my enthusiasm after meeting M.A. alumna from CSU, my feeling of success following my first NCA presentation, or my whimsical imaginings of my life as a graduate student and communication studies scholar, yet there I stood staring at my reflection in the Bean at Millennium Park, miles and miles from the cornfields being harvested and the community that I would return to for the upcoming Thanksgiving break in less than 10 days, resolving to move hundreds of miles to a place with mountains I had yet to see despite traveling abroad throughout childhood. I would return to those cornfields to study for the GRE in a tractor cab amid runs with the grain cart between the combine and the trucks on the road, my fall break tradition.

In the spring I would read Carr and Kefalas’s (2009) *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* in a Senior Perspective course taught in the anthropology department. In this book I first encountered the labels “Leavers,” “Stayers,” and “Returners.” As I read the chapters about “Achievers,” “Stayers,” “Seekers,” and “Returners” I thought about my own experiences as I put faces of people I knew from home to the labels. To me (1) the taxonomy was missing my own “Leaver” with “Returner” tendencies description, the liminal experience that seemed only to be articulated and understood among others who shared the same existence, and (2) needed more discussion about how these taxonomies were discursively constructed, particularly by the community.

In my own “coming to terms with cultures” I had become a “Leaver,” or rather an “Achiever,” who was predestined to leave the small town for college, a trajectory for not returning that I have never realized. My trajectory was indefinitely sealed when I came to a career path that made returning ever more complicated. Yet I refused to submit to the perception that I wanted to get away and never return.

This thesis *is about* my story, both my thoughtful attempt to tell an academic story and my personal attempt to come to terms, or reconcile the presence of multiple cultural codes in my life, articulated through the courageous voices of other young people and community members. I suppose in a way that this thesis *is* my story, yet I would never claim to have the answers to the rural brain drain. Rather, I am just a naïve scholar who believed there had to be discursive “coming to terms with cultures” moments underlying practices of “staying” “going,” and “returning” among young people that a communication studies perspective could address. Or maybe I am just crazy—that is, a crazy ethnographer of communication who thought I could figure out this cultural code in a rural community study of my hometown, a study that needed IRB approval and needed to happen in about a one year time frame. I am lucky that I had an advisor and committee who believed in me and my passion.

In the end, this thesis is about a code that I could not name in the fall of 2008, yet was at the center of my frustrations with *Speaking Culturally*. Why did I understand both the Teamsterville and the Nacirema ways of speaking? This thesis is about a complex code that in the fall of 2009 caused me a great deal of consternation, yet I did not have the cultural vocabulary to meta-communicatively voice. In fact, in the spring of 2011 when I started this project I did not realize I was looking for a code; I just came up with the labels: “staying,” “going,” and “returning” because I did not know how to otherwise talk about what I wanted to

study. Then, I returned from spending spring break 2012 in my hometown with a draft of chapter five to realize that I had not answered “What do participant discourses reveal about ‘coming to terms with cultures’ (Philipsen, 2008, p. 4)—the negotiation of two or more cultural codes in one’s life?” I thought about it and talked through it with my gracious advisor who suggested that the code of honor was being privileged in discourse. I, of course, retorted and then I opened my prized *Speaking Culturally* book to the Mayor Daley speech chapter and found the answer. Both the code of dignity and the code of honor were in play. I had been living the question all along, or that is since fall 2008.

So, I am the person “who come[s] . . . want[ing] help coming to terms with cultures” and “bring[s] a sense of purpose, usually an inchoate one, and a means to satisfy the longings” (Philipsen, 2008, p. 16). Hopefully, I have named the “means” and provided the “stories of people” who shared the complex cultural codes I went in search of (p. 16). However (in)complete, this thesis is about stories of people who live questions of culture, or more specifically “staying,” “going,” and “returning,” and the means they find to make sense of the journey home.

Live the questions.

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Appendix A

Fieldnote Sample

Date: June 14, 2011

Time: Tuesday Evening

Place: Street/ PICNIC SET UP

<i>Observations</i>	<i>Interpretation(s)</i>	<i>Impression(s)</i>	<i>Ponderings/Notes/Overflow</i>
<p>I went with my parents to help set up for the annual parish picnic. About 50+ people gathered. I watched as 12 ft. 2x6 lumber appeared through the church basement windows and was promptly grabbed by a group of men who carried it to the area where a stand would be erected. Pick-ups and men arrive with picnic tables. They are shuttling tables two by two from the town park. I watch a group assemble, disassemble, and reassemble metal polls in an attempt to erect the beer stand. A man on a tractor with a loader removes feed bunks from a trailer. These feed bunks become the base of the stage. Later a group of men will screw pilewood on top. Other men unload wooden spools, which function as tables, from a semi-trailer. Later these will be covered in festive plastic table clothes. Other men unload 50 gal. round plastic barrel from the same semi-trailer. These will be the trash cans. I watch men building benches along the church and school out of cement blocks and 2x6. With so much work to be done I can't stand around. An older gentleman calls me by name and asks me hand zip ties to him and another man as they put up the snow fence around the beer garden. They say little to each other than to something to the effect of: "Is it tight enough?"</p>	<p>Hard work. The expectation that all will help and that we can make things ourselves.</p> <p>This is stereotypical men's work.</p> <p>There seems to be very little talking necessary to make this work happen; people know what they are supposed to do and they do it. Instrumental discourse.</p> <p>Lots of physical labor necessary.</p> <p>Donated resources—both human and material—are used.</p> <p>Minimal working discourse is likely the result of "knowingness." People are familiar with each other, their work, and the event.</p>	<p>I am not sure how to do observations. I am known and expected to work. There's a lot to do.</p> <p>←I am not sure if these men know that I graduated from college or that I live in CO pursuing an MA. ←This is the second time I am called by name.</p>	<p>←These are the stands that I would stand around in and by throughout the weekend.</p> <p>←These benches are important later. This is where I will find people conversing numerous times over the weekend, but particularly in the speech act where I am called "a good hired girl."</p>

<p>Eventually, one asks me if I am home for the summer. Once I finish the zip tie project a man from the beer stand yells my name to bring them some zip ties. I give them a hand full and put the rest where the leftover snow fence is to be picked up. I hear my full first and last name from over my shoulder. I turn around to find a childhood friend surprised to see me. “I didn’t know you were coming home.” She and her sister and I talk briefly before they must go. I return to the school to help my mom with art show set up. When I check-in with mom I am immediately volunteered to help with something on Friday. I go outside and run into another community member. She asks what I am doing over the summer. I tell her that I am home, but doing work on my thesis. We talk for a bit. I try to be vague about what I am studying but it is difficult with someone who is also currently working towards a Master’s degree too. I go back to the art show and help recording artists, works, and mediums so official titles can be made. I chat with the older women who are also setting up the art show. I find my dad on a bench in front of church with many of the other men, many of whom are enjoying a beer. Bob, the man who asked me to help with the snow fence, tells my dad I was a “good hired-girl” and talks about when his daughters would come home from college and walk beans. Then they tell me about what I am missing out on by not having to walk beans.*</p>	<p>←This episode seems particularly significant to the phenomena. I am recognized for returning—for re-entering the community space, one associated with my own origins.</p> <p>←This episode is significant, but open to a complex interpretation. 1) Talking to someone in the community who has a stronger understanding of “thesis lingo.” 2) She is sort of a simultaneous stayer/goer by continuing to leave and serve in the community while also working at in the city.</p> <p>*Before commercial pesticide use soybean fields weeds had to be systematically removed by hand, row by row. This work offered summer employment to countless teenagers.</p>	<p>←Third time someone calls my name tonight.</p> <p>How do I observe when I always participating? Everyone is expected to help.</p> <p>I am not sure how to explain my thesis without getting follow-up questions I don’t know how to answer about the study right now.</p> <p>Being called a “good hired girl” makes my feminist-self annoyed, but my “farmer’s daughter”-self proud that I could be helpful., although I don’t really need to again hear how lucky I am that I don’t have to walk beans or de-tassel corn.</p>	<p>← Wonder if “coming home” has significance? My friend lives at home.</p>
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Appendix B

Recruitment Script

[To be used in talking to people on the phone and/or approaching them in public spaces.]

Hi [Insert Name]. I'm working on my Master's degree in Communication Studies at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, CO. As part of my schooling, I'm conducting a research project that centers on how people talk about their lives in small town, rural America. I would like to talk with people who are long-time residents of the community or young people who have grown up in the community and have moved away. The main interview would take approximately 45-60 minutes. Once I find results, and if you are willing, I may contact you for a follow-up interview which will take an additional 30 minutes of your time. Would you be willing to chat with me and tell me stories about your experiences here?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Interview Script/Verbal Alteration of Consent

Hi [insert name]. I appreciate you talking with me today and volunteering to be part of my research. I am working towards a Master's degree in Communication Studies at Colorado State University. This research is part of my coursework. It is under the direction of Eric Aoki, Ph.D., my thesis advisor.

I am interested in how people talk about their lives in a small town. Today I would like to ask you about your own experiences of small town life here. I encourage you to be as open and thorough with your answers as you can. It's most valuable for me to hear your stories just like you were telling them to another member of the community.

The interview should last about 45-60 minutes. I would like to audio record our conversation today so that I can transcribe them later. It will be helpful to have a written copy of our interview for research. The recordings will be destroyed after I transcribe them. Please know that your responses will remain confidential. I will assign you a code name so your responses will not be associated with you directly. In the case that you do not want to be audio recorded, I will simply take detailed notes during our interview. In my final project I do not identify the town by name. Only my advisor and I will have access to the raw data. Are you okay with the audio recording of our conversation?

Do you have any questions about interview process so far?

After I finish my research I would like to visit with participants to check that my interview findings reflect participants' experiences. Would you be willing to participate in an additional 30 minute follow-up interview at a later date?

Although your name won't be attached to your data, people may see us talking and know that you are participating in this research. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge about life in rural communities. It is not possible to identify all potential risks, but we have taken reasonable safeguards as researchers to minimize any known and potential, but unknown risks.

[To next page.]

-----[DETACH HERE]-----

If you have any further questions, please contact me (Lydia Reinig) at lydia.reinig@colostate.edu or my advisor, Dr. Eric Aoki at eric.aoki@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at 970-491-1655.

Know that you can stop the interview at anytime without consequence. Please don't hesitate to ask me questions at anytime. Again, I'll be taking notes for my own reference. This helps me remain focused on what you're saying and remember anything I might want to follow-up on. I might ask you to repeat something or give me an example. I might also restate what you said to summarize. I am only trying to make sure I capture what you mean.

Once again, your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Do you have any questions? Again, thank you for helping me with my research.

Finally, do you acknowledge that you understand your participation and willingness to volunteer for the study?

Interview Guide

Hello. As we get started with interview questions, do you agree to be audio-recorded for this interview?

[If you wish not to be recorded, please simply be reminded that I will be taking notes.]

1. How long have you lived in this town? Can you describe your way of life here? Are there things you like and don't like about the town?
2. What has/does this community mean(t) to you? Can you describe your connection to this place? What role does family and relationships with others have/hold for you in the community?
3. What do you consider to be some of the most important events in the town? What do you consider to be some of the most important places in the town? How would you describe your relationships in this small town?
4. Have you ever had a period in your life when you didn't live in this town? Have you thought about moving away? What keeps you associated with the town? How, if at all, are you a part of multiple communities?

Appendix D

Member Check Re-contact Script

Re-contact Telephone Script

Hi [insert name]. I appreciated you taking time to be part of my research on small town life. My advisor at Colorado State University, Eric Aoki, Ph.D., and I have recently finished analyzing my interview materials. In our initial interview you said that you would be willing to participate in a 30 minute follow-up interview to discuss my conclusions. Before writing up my final conclusions, I would like to visit with participants to see that my research findings reflect participants' experiences. Your participation is voluntary. Would you still be willing to chat with me about my findings?

If yes, ...

Thank you [insert name]. Because we are at a distance from each other I would prefer to continue to chat via the phone or by email. (However, I may have a few days that I would be in the area in mid-March if you would prefer to meet in person.) Do you have a preference for doing this follow-up via phone, email, or in person? When would you be available in the next _____ days/weeks? I would need to chat with you by _____.

I am looking forward to chatting with you again. Thank you for your help!

Appendix E

Member Check Protocol

Member Check Script/Verbal Alteration of Consent

Hi [insert name]. Thank you for volunteering to talk with me again. The stories you offered in our first interview have been helpful to my final project. Just as a reminder my project is under the direction of Eric Aoki, Ph.D. in the Communication Studies department at Colorado State University. This research is part of my M.A. coursework at Colorado State University.

In my project I am interested in how people talk about their experiences of life in a small town. My findings reflect participants' stories about their decision to stay, leave, or return to the community. Today I would like to ask you a few follow-up questions. This process is called a member check. The member check should take about 30 minutes to complete. I encourage you to be open and thorough with your responses.

Please know that your responses, both in the initial interview and today's member check, remain confidential. Only my advisor and I have access to the raw data from interviews and member checks. I have assigned you a code name in the reporting of your responses, so your responses are not associated with you directly. Our conversations today are labeled according to the code name I have assigned to you in my research. Keep in mind as well that I do not identify locations such as the town by name in my research. Also know that any contact information you provide as part of the interview process will not be shared.

For telephone/in-person member checks: I would like to audio record our conversation today (For telephone interviews: using the speaker phone feature and my audio recorder). It will be helpful to have a written copy of the member check for reference. The recordings will be destroyed after I transcribe them. In the case that you do not want to be audio recorded, I will simply take detailed notes during our interview. Are you okay with the audio recording of our conversation? Throughout today's conversation I may be taking brief notes as well. I may ask you to repeat something. I may also read my notes back to you. I only want to make sure I properly represent what you mean. Thank you.

For email member checks: Below you will find a list of questions based on my findings. Please type your responses in a reply by [insert date] to (lydia.reinig@colostate.edu). Your email response will be copied and pasted into a document labeled according to your code name to separate your contact information from your responses. The reply will also be immediately deleted in order to maintain confidentiality. I ask that you spend no more than 30 minutes responding to the list of questions regarding my findings. Thank you.

Please don't hesitate to ask me questions. **Know that your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the member check, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.** Although your name won't be attached to your data, people may see us talking, particularly if we speak in person, and know that you are participating in this research.

While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge about life in rural communities. It is not possible to identify all potential risks, but we have taken reasonable safeguards as researchers to minimize any known and potential, but unknown risks.

Do you have any questions? Thank you for helping me with my research.

Do you acknowledge that you understand your participation and willingness to volunteer for the member check?

Member-Check Guide

Hello. As we get started, do you agree to be audio-recorded during this member check?

1. Among the people that I interviewed, the idea that “everybody knows everybody” came up in nearly all the interviews. How would you briefly describe “everybody knows everybody”? Is it a positive to life in a small town? Is it a negative aspect of life in a small town? How?
2. In my study I found that people valued coming back to visit or to live. This seemed to include family of people who grew up in the community and moved away, as well as young people who left for college and returned for visits. Can you please confirm, extend, or disconfirm whether you agree with this conclusion on the importance of people coming back?
3. Among the people I interviewed, many suggested an expectation that younger generations would move away to go to college and find a job, likely not in their hometown. Do you agree that young people are expected to go to college? What are some of the benefits and challenges of having young people going away to college?
4. One of my interviewees used the phrase “town family” to describe that way people interact in the community. Is the term “town family” an accurate representation of your experience? Why, or why not? What term would use to describe the community?
5. Since our last interview, would there be anything else that you would like to share with me about life in a small town?