

Community through self: perception, expression and relationships

An inquiry into perceptions of self and the world in search of community, with unavoidable methodological reflections



Road to Canton, SD Author Photo, 2012

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Abstract

This paper explored perception, expression and individuals' relationships with worldly aspects as a means towards community understanding. Interviews and surveys from participants of Canton, SD, USA provided the majority of the data for engagement. This paper focused on self to community mainly through the following worldly aspects: nature, food, yard, home, and garden. Relationships were explored through participant expressions in multiple formats: drawing, interviews, ratings, and word prompts. The author employed a sample of mixed methods in both data collection and framework, though human ecology supplied a major platform for a focus on humans and their environment. This paper explored a route towards understanding humans in their complexity through a dialogue with the data from individual to worldly aspect to community. The complexity of selves, worldly aspects, relations between, community, as well as choosing and using suitable methods and frameworks demonstrated the need to engage a flexible collection of individual understandings of participants' relationships in order to approach a deep understanding of community.

Key Words: Perception, community, self, nature, human ecology, interdisciplinary, reflection

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Introduction

In the arena of environmental changes and sustainability actions, effects are observed through number of public transportation frequenters, changes in atmosphere, measured resources, weight of plastic waste, etc. Researchers can count people, tally incomes, compare education levels, track lineage, or map their coordinates in relation to other factors. In contrast, perceptions, expression, community and sense of, are less explicit or quantifiable but still essential to an understanding of local and global issues of environment and sustainability. This paper seeks to understand individuals and their perceptions and expressions of themselves and their community and world. Consideration of perception and individuals’ relationships with the world, within a community, for a community understanding, not only complements cultural considerations, but also approaches issues of power by exploring relationships of community and individual through careful colloquy. An understanding of which, is a power in itself.

This paper explores an important aspect of a community understanding. It is a qualitative evaluation, not solely expressed by numbers and figures. Methodologically, it is deeply individual, yet digs for community understanding and/or methods towards such an understanding. I am not suggesting this as a substitute for more technical and quantifiable means of understanding a people and place, but rather an essential component, an indispensable supplement to any overall understanding of a group and its individuals. This understanding is a feat, considering the complexities of the perception, people and community it wishes to understand. Methodology and framework used in this understanding mirrors in complexity and is

not ignored but rather explored through careful reflection and attention to the power of methods and theory.

My research topic focused on the community of Canton, South Dakota, United States. Canton's 2010 population was 3057 (United States Census Bureau, 2010). I, the researcher, was born approximately twenty miles from Canton; grew up, attended k-12 school, and worked various jobs in Canton; and have returned yearly to visit my mother and father, still living in Canton. This brief researcher biography is a necessary offering to readers, as it announces the researcher's, my, relationship with the community of study as well as my awareness of this connection. Nearly every aspect of this study is affected by my place in and connection to the community. As Malterud writes, "A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" (2001, 483-484). The relationship indeed prompted the study and awareness of the implications of the relationship encouraged the emphasis on a continuous reflection which propels the paper and research question through methods and theory. Attention to and possible implications of this propulsion and association are expanded throughout, enhancing the dimensions of the primary question.

I do not think that an exact inner "truth" exists in the way the word may suggest and as Bateson describes as unobtainable, "a precise correspondence between our description and what we describe or between our total network of abstractions and deductions and some total understanding of the outside world" (Bateson 1980, 25). Furthermore, I do not suggest that there is an inner truth of perception, expression, or description which I seek to expose in the participants of this community—which is why I abstain from using the word *truth*, and opt for *expressions* and *perceptions*. The small to big illustration which Bateson suggests to reach in truth, I strive to reach in modest inquiry. This paper understands perception from an individual; in order to better understand the individual's relationships; to better understand that individual within their community; in hopes of better understanding that community; all, while unavoidably attempting to understand the methodological and theoretical journey.

In seeking a qualitative understanding, I exercise various methods of investigation into perception of self and expressions of that perception of self with aspects of the world. I seek a deep, holistic understanding of the people from an individual level—a deep understanding which attempts to transcend scale of individual to community while at the same time straining to avoid generalizations by understanding the community not as a community in itself, but as a community of *many selves*.

Research question

My research question is exploratory and cannot be contained by a *single* question word, such as “Can”, “What”, “Why,” or “How”. Therefore, this paper must ask “Can”, “What”, “How”, and “Why”. The suggested inquiry into relationships is further demonstrated through the flexible usage of position words such as: *and, through, in, between, and to*. In consideration of the aim of this study and the weight of question words, I ask:

What can I understand about individuals [of Canton] and/through/in relation to their expressions of self, and self and/in relation to various worldly aspects (e.g., nature, food, yard, home, garden)? And through these individual understandings, what can I understand about their community?

Though I settled upon “What” and “Can”, as overarching question words for conciseness, “How”, and “Why” are implied and crucial to the question—their inclusion inescapable; their necessity radiating throughout the paper.

That being said, all words within and related to the research question were not chosen lightly. Though “What” and “Can” were chosen as the main question words, the methodological nature of this paper requires supplemental question words. “I” is used as in “I the researcher” but does not imply this is research dedicated to my exclusive understanding. It merely means I asked the initial question and embarked upon the initial research and inquiry. “I” could easily be substituted with the royal “one.” But, because of the attention to methodology and the reflective nature of the paper, I thought it best to directly refer to the person reflecting. The inclusion of “understand” is slightly more difficult to explain, as I am slightly less convinced of its

qualification. I may just as well have said, “What can be said about.” I seek a qualitative, in-depth, personal view of individuals and their expressions. See also *A little more on concepts and definitions* and *Research and Research Methodology* for more on my usage of “understanding.”

Location did not escape the obligation of clarifications. The bracketed “of Canton” refers to the community in focus. The rural location blurs community borders. Some members, technically residing in another town by zip code, consider themselves from Canton due to other ties with the community (e.g., school, work) and so felt compelled to complete this survey designated for people from Canton. Many words in the research question required vagueness (e.g., *and*, *through*, *in relation to*, and *with*). This ambiguity was necessary in order to imply inquiry into the relationships between self and world. The inquiry, findings, and discussion explore the relationships. The grammatically correct word depends on that exploration. Limiting this particular word choice during the research question would, in some way, be predetermining the conclusion.

“Their expressions” refers only to the methods of data collection I used in this research and does not imply all expressions were employed or exhausted nor concluded upon for this understanding. “Self” was a complicated word to incorporate. This paper investigates the self as per participant, despite scholarly debate on self and definitions of self. Though, this paper does not completely disregard scholarly debates; it focuses on participant expression of self using exact participant words as well as scholarly dialogue.

“Worldly aspects,” could have been replaced with “x” in the research question and, in fact, is throughout the paper. I chose themes in order to explore and find relationships. I surely couldn’t explore expression of self and relation to *everything*. I hesitated to use the words “items,” “material,” or “components,” because I felt they suggested or limited too much prior to exploration. I even hesitated to use “other,” in order to not limit expression of placement or connection to the aspects. The flexibility and generosity of, “worldly aspects,” must do. “Worldly aspects” compatibility with “x” allows for various explorations in this paper as well as providing a model of options for future researchers.

In order to clarify and contain my curiosities, I used an aid: $\text{self} + x = \underline{\quad}$. It appears an equation, but it is not in either an *equal* sense or a *mathematical* sense of the word. It is a map, skeleton, figure, and a guide for both researcher and reader. I do not imply both sides of the equal sign are quantitatively or qualitatively equal. I only use the figures and letters as my own track with which I travel forward and backward upon—stopping, starting, and discussing when I see fit. In this aid, I apply self as previously described, though with a subtle leaning towards expression of self. The “+” represents the relationships, connections, space, non-space, between x and self. It very well could have been an arrow though I felt a pre-implicit direction could be harmful to inquiry. The “x” is “worldly aspects” as previously described. I included the “=” as a representation of my exploration between self and x and what that explored self says about community. It represents my attempt to discuss the scale of community with my exploration of expressions of self and x. Again, it does not represent equal, and could be substituted with “says about”. The “ $\underline{\quad}$ ”, is sometimes left as such, to suggest possible substitutions of exploration. Put into words, my aid could read: I look at [an expression of] self and various worldly aspects through each other (i.e., their relationships, connections, inseparability, distance between, etc.) to see what, if anything, they or I can say or understand about the selves and their community. I understand the personalized and perhaps complicated temperament of this aid. And so with that in mind, the discussion guides the reader along with frequent referrals and diagrams. Despite the undertone, I refer to it as “the equation,” or “my equation” throughout the paper.

As seen through the dissection of the equation, this paper is also, in a large part, an investigation on *how* to navigate the primary research question. I simultaneously reflect upon the methods and approaches employed throughout my research. My research question is a journey. I reflect upon the path; how far to walk; and whether it is advisable. While exploring self, perception, expression, and relationships through $\text{self} + x = \underline{\quad}$; I recount my strides, note my turns, and am conscious of the shoes worn, in order that future researchers, should they choose to walk a similar path, can do so mindfully—utilizing my own steps and missteps.

This paper is a blended inquiry into both the primary research question and the frameworks (e.g., method, theory) used. It is not two papers. It is one string of two woven, knotted, and twisted strands of inquiry into a community’s perception and expression of the self and world through

many lenses. While at the same time, it is an adventure in the distortion, vastness, implications, hindrances as well as possible benefits of methods chosen.

Aim/Purpose: explore and reflect

I explore a community's individuals' perceptions of themselves and such items as food, garden, yard, home, and nature while remaining self-aware by acknowledging and exploring my position in the community and discussing that self-awareness. I also explore my role in choosing, or choosing to not choose, lenses, frameworks, and methods with which to understand the phenomena. Using a personalized aid, $self + x = ___$, my exploration is my initial attempt at exploring community understanding. It is my first step in a layered approach to social science research of self and community using several methods and paradigms.

I aim to understand people as deeply as possible. I use and discuss my mixed methods and somewhat free use of paradigms, a use which I believe is a route towards understanding humans in their complexity. The individuals of the community exist in their many selves despite paradigm shifts. This research includes mixed branches of thought that should not be degraded or decomposed into narrow and meticulously labeled pieces for the sake of convenience or academic presentation. I present the community as a collection of humans with various perceptions; using, and through, a mix of expressions; explored through many methods; and discussed using several paradigms. Simplification, though tempting in its terseness is *not* an option.

Research and research methodology

The understanding I hope to gain from and through my research can be elaborated using Gregory Bateson's usage and exploration of the "feel" of culture (1972, 81). Within culture, I search for the feel of the community through the individual, the community's selves. I recognize this as an exhausting, vague, and convoluted feat, and so I present this endeavor as an attempt to feel the community and its selves while trying-out, reviewing and responding to the utilized methodology.

Understanding is a reoccurring theme of this paper. It is curious to suggest that the word *understanding* could be *misunderstood*. I've already used understanding through Bateson's "feel" (Bateson 1972), but considering understanding through its extraction and breadth further demonstrates its place in this study, a relation inspired by Alvesson and Skölberg's words in *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*,

Even though 'facts' are the surface of friction necessary to generate theory, theory is not a simple summary or description of 'empirical facts' as in natural history. The theory must also transcend 'facts' in order to achieve scope. 'Facts' thus serve to *occasion* the theory, while continually playing the role of critical tuning instrument and fount of new ideas for theory.

(2009, 4)

This paper attempts to understand, to "transcend", by way of alternative exploration of self and relationships as well as reflection and discussion of primary data through, and in spite of, multiple theories. The engagement of expressions serves as its own "critical tuning instrument", conversing and building upon the included theory and method.

I often use "understanding" and "feeling" both in word and concept, loosely and interchangeably because neither word independently describes the level of appreciation I wish to reach. Eloquent phrases provide additional support: "Every art of analysis is mocked by the extraordinary complexity and subtlety of shading with which this feeling(...)vibrates through the external organization of humanity and enlivens it with its warmth" (Dilthey and Betanzos 1988, 116). Feeling and understanding weave themselves into this paper as a means to describe the complex entity of exploration, from self, through perception and worldly objects, to community. The spaces or non-spaces between are themselves under investigation and so the words used to describe the collective situation are difficult to find and dangerous to compress.

When I speak of phenomena, I do not suggest that I carefully chose this community because I thought it was special in anyway. Though, I do not deny it; this community differs in that the researcher is from it. I revisited this community searching for a way to contribute a deep understand of an aspect of the selves that comprise a community. The significance lies not in Canton, but in understanding the selves of Canton.

The history of this particular community and demographic is not central to this study. I do not suggest history does not play a part in self, expression, or community; although, in consideration of space limitations and relevance to the immediate research question, it has for the most part been omitted. Apart from superficial inquiry into the future community scenarios, I avoid excessive jumps throughout scales of time. I do not underestimate the importance of history and attention to time; I only avoid it for the sake of conciseness and in acknowledgment of my strengths as a researcher and writer. It would be useful to explore that dimension more, in future research.

I chose the area and location of study. Laura Nader points out, “While scientific findings may be ideally viewed as “value free”(…)the choice of subject for scientific enquiry is certainly not ‘value free’” (1972, 19). I chose to study my own childhood community and accept the subsequent value connotations. I won’t deny an impulse to defend my family, friends, and neighbors against harsh comments and assumptions. I do not claim this motive nor aim to illicit a fight in Canton’s honor. I use it to juggle an exploration of the individuals of Canton as selves in a community rather than selves of Canton while checking my own place and tendencies as an intimately connected researcher.

The community is my community. I want my research to be honest. I chose my own community to be closer to my participants. I cannot deny that I *may* know or *know of* every participant, and so this paper should not suggest otherwise. I do not see this connection, or my placement in the community, as a handicap; but in fact, a benefit. In Nader’s words, “Anthropologists might indeed ask themselves whether the entirety of fieldwork does not depend upon a certain power relationship in favor of the anthropologist, and whether indeed such dominant-subordinate relationships may not be affecting the kinds of theories that we are weaving” (1972, 5). I argue that by studying the very community I was born into and grew up in, I minimize possible anthropologist power blindness.

My methods require a fair amount of qualitative exploration. When exploring a culture’s expressions, especially their spoken and written words, it is important to be aware of cultural

schemas. My placement, or link at the very least, in the community of focus eliminates some of the complications of differing cultural schemas in a search for meaning in words, as geographically, my cultural schema resembles the participants' (Bernard 2002).

Despite its benefits, my place and past in the community is a position that must be considered when seeking to understand phenomena in the community among the community members. I reiterate, my history and choice to study Canton influences my exploration as well as my methods (Malterud 2001); a connection, I do not take lightly.

Through my preliminary research, stumbles, and subsequent methodological engagements, I hope to offer a device, or even one piece of a device, which aids others philosophically, methodologically, in research, or otherwise so that they, too, can come a step closer to such understandings. This device manifests itself throughout the paper, a companion thread to the original research undertaking.

I chose a mixed method, multiple paradigm, self-aware, and reflective approach which mimics the complexity of society and environmental issues. My exploration could further be seen as my preliminary attempt at understanding these perceptions and expressions of self as groundwork for understanding participants' relationships, positions, and community, as a basis for community action, environmentalism, and other larger movements. My approach's benefits and limitations are noted and weaved throughout the sections as issues present themselves. A slight conversational tone represents my research methodological learning process, which I think serves the reader best.

My research is interdisciplinary, borrowing from numerous fields, including anthropology and as Bernard states, "The truth is, from the earliest days of the discipline right up to the present, anthropologists have been prodigious inventors, consumers, and adapters of research methods" (2002, 2). If anthropologists invent, consume, and adapt research methods (Bernard 2002) I do the same though maneuvering within not only one field but between several. My approach seeks to capture or at least chase the complexities of human perception, expression, and community. I chase these complexities using a blended framework of various methods, theories, concepts, and

even disciplines. I first attempt to isolate and discuss the methods in order to grasp my research actions. Because of the consistent stress on method, method descriptions are also expanded upon in the discussion section alongside the discussion of the primary research question.

In order to understand the scales of my participants and research question I decided against a specified hunt. I could not predict correlations between specific questions or their final significance so I chose to overdo it. I collected data from many groups in many ways. As stated before, my research and thus methods are mainly qualitative (e.g., semi-structured interviews, drawings) though not completely absent of quantitative features (e.g., rating scales, yard size).

Participants included in this research are the result of convenience or haphazard sampling. Because the main purpose of this paper was not to generalize across communities or make any statement of significance about the chosen community in itself, but rather to explore the journey from self, perception of worldly aspects, to community; the research merely required *selves* and a *community*. The convenience sampling melted into snowball sampling, as convenient participants recommended others (Bernard 2002). The only restrictions I had in mind were limiting participants to those considering themselves from Canton, South Dakota, USA.

I opened online surveys, of which nineteen were completed. If a random sampling of Canton was desired, my distribution was indeed flawed as I struggled to spread the internet address. I asked interviewees to take and share the online survey; I placed handouts of the link on tables of local restaurants; I also distributed handouts of the link to Rotary Club members. One interviewee attached the link of my survey to church members through the church's mailing list.

I conducted ten semi-structured interviews. Interviews were scheduled via telephone, personal encounter, or through online correspondence, but actual interviews were always conducted face-to-face. I asked similar base questions to each interviewee, but also asked follow-up questions and let the interview flow as a conversation. This paper's discussion focuses on specific words and text; so, I avoided including any unstructured interview encounters which lacked recorded or written account to maintain clarity and consistency. Upon verbatim transcription, I discovered I

practiced excessive “Uh-huh” probes which may have encouraged the interviewees to offer more (Bernard 2002) in person than in the one-sided, silent online survey.

Five drawing response surveys were collected. Hopes were much higher for this method, though my drop-and-collect technique (Bernard 2002) complicated response numbers due to scheduling difficulties and participants forgetting to complete the survey upon my collection. They are only referred to in the discussion and not explicitly engaged. I distributed a similar drawing survey to children in an after-school program which differed from the adult version, in that it also included word prompt sections. Children’s drawings are engaged, though word prompt sections only mentioned. In addition to distributing the children’s surveys, I also oversaw their completion. Aspects of this are elaborated in the discussion.

Through these methods I investigated the narrations of my participants. My investigation resembled narrative analysis in that probed participants responses and stories (Bernard 2002). I considered drawings, interviews, and essay responses in my analysis, as well as my analysis, as stories. Reissman’s words on narrative analysis influenced my broad scope of story, “Story telling, to put the argument simply, is what we do with our research materials and what informants do with us” (1993, 1).

I chose Daiute and Lightfoot’s definition of narrative analysis, which exemplifies the compatibility of narrative analysis with my research question as well as the opportunities the approach creates in my engagement and discussion: “‘Narrative Analysis’ is a place holder for different ways of conceptualizing the storied nature of human development. Narrative may be a metaphor for a life course, a development theory, a reference to a totalizing cultural force, and/or the method for interpreting oral or written narrative discourse” (2004, x). This definition exhibits narrative analysis’s ability to facilitate my exploration of connections and relationship of self, worldly aspects, and community. As narrative analysis suggests, I’ve approached my research and analysis based on themes (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004), such as: self, nature, food, yard and garden.

Narrative Analysis' strengths as Daiute and Lightfoot describe are its "theoretical complexity" and "methodological diversity" (2004, viii), similarities which resemble this study's theoretical and methodological structure. Daiute and Lightfoot also refer to researchers who have adopted narrative methods, finding them particularly useful for "addressing the unmet challenge of integrating culture, person, and change" (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004, viii). This resembles the individual, relationship and community aspects of this study's research question. It serves as a means to perception, as a route towards how individuals "make sense of their lives" (Phinney 2000, 28), as well as a glimpse into the elusive network of happenings, not easily seen from a community approach (Phinney 2000).

In searching through all of my data, despite my seemingly literal investigation of words, I employ a version of trained subjectivity using Holland and Leander's view of subjectivities: "...as actors' thoughts, sentiments, and embodied sensibilities, and, especially, their sense of self and self-world relations" (Holland and Leander 2004, 127). Careful attention is paid to subjectivity in order to also attend to issues of power and positioning (Holland and Leander 2004). Ortner's definition of subjectivity further resembles my study's span from the individual to the community,

" by subjectivity I mean the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects. But I will always mean as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on."
(Ortner 2005, 31)

Simply, I include subjectivity as a main approach to my research and analysis because I could not remove subjectivity from the individuals of Canton, else I remove the human (Ortner 2005). I, as Ortner has done from psychology to cultural formations, use subjectivity in reference to individuals, their perceptions and expressions, as well as broader community constructions (Ortner 2005).

I consider my narration a display of subjectivity as well as a method which demonstrates my efforts towards the unattainable objectivity. But despite the impossibility, I, along with other scientists find worth in the attempt (Bernard 2002). My attempts are most clearly seen in my reflective narration. As Bernard states, "this means being explicit about our measurements, so that others can more easily find the errors we make"(Bernard 2002, 5).

My research is mainly qualitative and much of my narration based on retrospective reflection, perhaps by default, as Ely states, “Doing qualitative research is by nature a reflective and recursive process” (Ely 1991, 179). I consider this a method, though due to the methodological significance of this paper, it has nestled and somewhat camouflaged itself within the discussion section. Soon after the mass and mess of collection, I predicted much of my research would be useless. Now, I think differently. A walk down the twisted path of my methodology, while I—the researcher—narrates and reflects upon the journey and it is revealed: In reflective methodology, there is *usefulness* in its *uselessness*.

Framework of study

Despite my attempts at organization, the following section is an unavoidable blend of framework, both theoretical and analytical; literature review; concepts; and the occasional drip of method as needed. Often the previously mentioned installments were best illuminated in the discussion alongside the research analysis. I hope their encores do not confuse, but instead serve as reminders and re-reminders of their relevance.

Human ecology is interdisciplinary with emphasis and foci accumulated across fields, theories, and frameworks; concepts and substance of such seep and spread across academia—a framework and substance with which I attempt to apply to my topic and approach my topic through. Human ecology is also a “perspective of collective life as an adaptive process consisting of an interaction of environment, population, and organization” (Hawley 1986, 3-4), a process which echoes the aim of this study. Despite the theoretical and perspective breadth of human ecology, students of human ecology may be tempted to limit, focus, and strip their broad, branching, fabulously complex ideas in order to complete a concise final thesis—or, to merely complete a thesis at all. I suggest pruning. I do not completely deny the paper’s branches. It is 3-dimensional, not easily trellised for the sake of format. I do, however, respect academia and the power of expressing information in a readable, presentable, powerful arrangement for humans so others may add to or learn from [the mistakes of] it.

I hesitated to limit myself or this paper theoretically or methodologically, not out of principled rebellion, but out of necessity. I acknowledge the shortcomings and difficulties a single framework faces in order to explain a complex topic. Forcing a framework could bring to light interesting information, as Kuhn notes on paradigm, “It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well” (1996, 111); but it could also create an inflated version of the information out of necessity. I am not labeling such limitations or discoveries as “good” or “bad”. They are “of note”. Noting and checking their existence and power presents a sort of framework in itself.

I cannot claim a human ecological view without discussing, admitting and embracing an interdisciplinary approach. Together, for my paper, they are an overarching framework, from which multiple fields’ paradigms, theories, and concepts stream. This paper is explicitly interdisciplinary in its use of methods and theories from anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and sociology. Many of which span several fields, and so are primarily discussed in absence of their respective field ‘parents’ in this and the following sections.

Phenomenology, as utilized by multiple fields, is applied throughout this study. It can also be used to describe my aim to understand: “In a phenomenological study, the researcher tries to see reality through another person’s eyes” (Bernard 2002, 23). It also supports the study’s attention to subjectivity and partiality towards narratives as: “...phenomenologists seek to *sense* reality and to describe it in words rather than numbers—words that reflect consciousness and perception” (Bernard 2002, 23).

Regardless of designated fields, frameworks, and theories, my research still exists in its basic state of sensation, as do my participants. If I chose to not choose or self proclaim a framework or lens, I would still hold the colored papers in front of me. My participants would still exist; Canton would still exist; and the relationships would still exist. This paper explores that existence. Bernard describes the aim of phenomenologists as more descriptive than explanatory or causal (Bernard 2002, 23); the aim of this paper follows suit. Though, my description of experience is more abstract, as the *description* of expression of self, x, and community.

Phenomenology's attention to relationships, shared experiences and "our ability to relate to the feelings of others" (Bernard 2002) also resonates in this exploration. In this study, the "ability to relate to the feelings of others" applies to the researcher's position with participants and the community; the participants' position within the community with other participants; and the participants' position with worldly aspects. I do not necessarily suggest that the worldly aspects have feelings, but rather, that they have position with which the participants can relate and express. I discuss understanding, feel, and relationships, but perhaps Dahlberg and Dalhberg's description of phenomenology offers more, "Phenomenology(...)focuses the relationship between the subject and the world. The lifeworld is the lived and experienced world and thus it is something more than the world itself, and more than the subject itself" (Dahlberg and Dahlberg 2003, 36). It is a grasp of this "lifeworld", this "lived and experienced", this "more" (Dahlberg and Dahlberg 2003), this "feel" (Bateson 1972), this pulsing "self +x = __," that I seek.

The personal and expressive nature of my research as well as my quest for the feel of the participants and their community suggests an air of humanism, especially humanism as Wilk describes: "Scientific humanism is the moral practice of science, science itself seen as culture, as expressive of a human way of life" (Wilk 1991, ix). Despite intent, humanism resonates throughout my research methods and analysis.

In an investigation into self, perceptions, expressions, and relationships a researcher can hardly escape his or her own [all of the above]; my own [all of the above]; and my participants' [all of the above], as they weave a significantly complex web of influence upon one another. I not only acknowledge this inability to stand outside of my research, I'll intentionally take one more step in with the approach of reflexivity.

I use the following definition of reflexivity, "...as a critical approach to professional practice that questions how knowledge is generated and, further, how relations of power influence the processes of knowledge generation" (D'Cruz, Gillingham, and Melendez 2007, 77), in that I question the "relations of power" as well as the mere "relations". As I step in, as per assuming the role of reflexive researcher, I also accept criticisms of those steps. As D'cruz, Gillingham and Melendez write, "What we know and how we know become the foci of scrutiny" (D'Cruz,

Gillingham, and Melendez 2007, 78). I not only recognize my knowledge and assumptions' power, but also, through my narration and discussion, using reflexivity, I communicate and display those influences (D'Cruz, Gillingham, and Melendez 2007, 78).

Before accusations of not deeply understanding the suggested mass of method, theory, concepts, and scholars—I argue, the mess of mass is essential to navigate my question. It may seem superficial, but it is strategic sampling. Time and experience limit depth per topic. I only have my experience and knowledge thus far, these words, and this amount of time. Therefore, I use the selections as deeply and responsibly as I can. I intend no disuse or intentional misrepresentation.

Marx states the link, “To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature” (Marx 1975, 41), in this study of self and worldly aspects, I do not state that link with such certainty. Instead, I focus on the scenario of links and/or separation—the space between or not between the relationships of man and worldly aspects. I also do not offer a stance on the appropriate relationship between mind and nature, as Bateson may preach in *Mind and Nature: A necessary unity* (Bateson 1980) I only seek to see it, to understand it, to “feel” it (Bateson 1972).

I begin this exploration of self, through participants’ perceptions and couldn’t proceed without at least a brief discussion of perception in itself. I prefer Dahlberg and Dahlberg’s description of self, “Perception is in a way the foundation of human being. Perception is the way in which we relate to the world or rather, it is the way we *are* to the world” (Dahlberg and Dahlberg 2003, 35), for its relevance to the scope of this study. This study is an inquiry not suggesting finality on the matter of selves in their community, so I would substitute their “rather” for “perhaps” and alter their statement for my inquiry as, “a way in which we relate to the world or perhaps it is the way we *are* to the world.”

The worldly aspects as perceived by the participants are explored through my attention to relationships. Throughout the analysis and discussion, an essence of “human characteristics” of the objects of relation, and the relationships with them, is exhibited. I recognize the possible

relationships as Merleau-Ponty describes: “Our relationship with things is not a distant one: each speaks to our body and to the way we live. They are clothed in human characteristics...” (Merleau-Ponty, Davis, and Baldwin 2004, 63) I use this view as a means to describe and narrate relationships, without forcing the relationships or aspects into the “other.”

My original research question may be criticized for attempting to understand the community level from an analysis of the individual (Moran 1990) I do not shift in scale, from individual to community, in order to make broad generalizations, but rather out of necessity, to explain one scale from the other and through the other. The use of many disciplines helps navigation throughout scales. I do not generalize these perceptions, expressions, and relations across scale to other communities, but rather, present my techniques as possible means for future researchers to apply in their own community of study.

In my engagement of relationships, nature, yard, food, home and garden are reoccurring themes. In *The lawn: a history of an American obsession*, Jenkins focuses on American culture and states, “this notion of controlling nature is central to American thinking” (Jenkins and Institution 1994, 135). Jenkins discusses control in relation to money spent on human controlling structures (Jenkins and Institution 1994). I explore this control aspect in terms of expressions about worldly aspects (e.g., lawn, garden, nature, and food), through expressions of affect on, and, or from.

As Behar states in *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart* “Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them” (1997, 5). I too, was bombarded by this strangeness and found it difficult to proceed without being overwhelmed by possibilities, sensations, encounters—life. I needed something to bring myself back to a central question, a central aim, a central curiosity. As mentioned before, I chose: $self + x = _$. As a reminder, when considering this equation, I did not, nor should the reader think of it mathematically. It served as an analytical framework, a guide, a path through symbols; the symbols gently manipulated by me, the researcher, in order to lay the tracks for action and thought. It was a major tool for me, the researcher. Methodological reflection is a major ingredient of this paper and the equation a nagging theme throughout my methods. Leaving out

my equation, would be dishonestly withholding of my experience through this research and the paper ultimately incomplete in its absence.

I was inspired by grounded theory. A process described by Bernard as, “a set of techniques for (1) identifying categories and concepts that emerge from text, and (2) linking the concepts into substantive and formal theories” (2002, 462-463). My approach resembled grounded theory in my interpretation and use of themes from primary data in and for my analysis. (Corbin and Strauss 1990). I applied the first stages of grounded theory, in my interpretation of “meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings” (Gephart Jr 2004, 457), as well as through Suddaby’s (2006) description of Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory as “an organic process of theory emergence based on how well data fit conceptual categories identified by an observer, by how well the categories explain or predict ongoing interpretations” (Suddaby 2006, 634). I only apply methods and analyses which resemble aspects of grounded theory as I neglected critical comparative and simultaneous aspects of grounded theory. The included resemblances are best exhibited in my thematic investigation of verbatim interviews; text answers; and analysis of drawings.

A reminder amidst the jumbled mass of theories, methods, and concepts: this paper is best viewed, encompassed within, or guided by the framework of human ecology, a forgiving platform from which an ensemble of views, theories, methods, and concepts gather, mingle, and perform.

A little more on concepts and definitions

In Daniel Miller’s discussion in *Stuff*, of stuff and definitions of, he expresses his “horror” of trying to label or dismiss things as *stuff* (Miller 2009, 1). This “horror” was present in my study, especially through my usage of the words “worldly aspects”, which I would have preferred to call “things”, though hesitated due to the material connotation it could convey. The “horror” was also present in my approach to most situations of defining, especially of words used in research questions and collection. I reiterate: I am not trying to determine a comprehensive, all-human definition of nature, self, home, food, garden, yard, etc. But rather, I try to understand them as per self in my equation through x. I am trying to feel nature, self, home and food as various

selves, the participants, in a community perceive them. I did not give them a standard definition as participants do not all hold a standard definition of the prompted words. Instead, my working definition of nature, for example, is perhaps not nature at all, but each participant's nature for the space and time from which they expressed it. And so, I do not explicitly define. Despite my avoidance of precise definitions, I explore their existence in the world, and especially my research. I refer to them delicately as per situation, paying close attention to my own usage and the attached insinuations.

Just as Bateson uses “ordinary material universe” in reference to “Jung’s pleroma” (Bateson 1980, 89), I responsibly bent or slightly extended terms used by Bateson in *Mind and Nature* which I understood as similar enough to link for the sake of observing relationships. Employing this liberty, I was made aware early on of improvements to my approach of prompting expression of self and x. Bateson suggests that one’s description (which I extend to a combination of the process and of my usage of the words *perception* and *expression*) of the material universe (which I extend to my usage of, and inquiry into, worldly aspects) is very different than one’s description of mind (which I extend to my perception and expression of self). The description of the basis of an event in the material world is explained by one part of the material world acting on another part of the material world—key phrase: action on. The description of the mind (my *self*) depends on relationships between parts or between one part in time—relationships. I explore this throughout the engagement. Sometimes, in my quest for thematic organization my engagement showed me, by binding food to nature or garden to another x entirely. This difference in description, my *perception* and *expression*, also suggests I should have created a space for my participants to stretch their descriptive limbs—to first find their own mind (*self*) in relation to components within itself, detected by changes within that self. Instead I threw them straight into relations between their self and forced worldly aspects one at a time, assuming I could investigate their selves through this exclusive relationship while completely bypassing the complex relationships not only between parts of self, but also among “x”s; and between parts of x.

The concept of external organization is present in my paper especially as Dilthey and Betanzos describe through the subject’s experience : “one discovers one’s will in a nexus of external

connections, in relations of dominance and dependence with regard to persons and things, and in relations to community” (Dilthey and Betanzos 1988, 115). The concept is not necessarily elaborated, but instead pulses throughout the paper from question to conclusion. I apply the same concept of connection, focusing on its description and attention to the intricate tangle of levels within and between self and community. I am not attempting to discover will, or the participant’s will, but rather suggest the relationships I explore and the expressions I extract from participants could be viewed as supplementary, or in partial substitution to Dilthey and Betanzos’ wills. Research could glimpse at a participant’s perception using Dilthey and Betanzos’ description and my equation: “nexus of external connections” and “relations of dominance and dependence” as my +; “persons and things” as my x; and “relations to community” as my =_____.

The Discussion: Introduction

The vast responses from members of a community in multiple formats gave a complex representation of a complex community of complex individuals. Some participants engaged in more than one form of participation. But because of the semi-anonymous nature of some methods and the chance for mislabeling, I chose to view each piece of data as a separate participant all of which are kept anonymous. The main forms of data engaged are online surveys, drawing surveys completed by children, and interviews. Research was collected between December 15, 2011-February 27, 2012. A separate section for findings and discussion does not suit the nature of my research and paper. My findings are for the most part qualitative and significant as per observer. Therefore, the discussion has appropriately absorbed the findings.

During research, my direction of interest was broad; it was a path down my equation: self + x =____. With that magical trip in mind, I discuss my research question while inquiring upon my methods. Sometimes I refer to “what I *was* looking for” as I discuss the participant responses. This is meant both as an explanation of my intentions as well as a disclaimer of the inescapable goggles through which I viewed responses.

I begin the discussion by presenting a personalized account of the methods employed, both included and omitted in the engagement, which guides the reader through the rest of the engagement. After the summary, responses from all research types are regrouped and discussed

according to theme: self, nature, food, home, yard, garden, and community. As this is a discussion largely of relationships, sections are by no means sterile of other sections. Themes and headings served to combine forms of research as well as assisting both reader and researcher through their thematic connections.

Due to time and space limitations I could not discuss each and every question. And in fact, some methods were also omitted from discussion. Their absence does not mean they did not inspire frameworks or discussion. I also do not dismiss the importance and possible significance of omitted questions and methods as this selection is, in itself, incredibly subjective. I cannot promise that I chose or did not choose questions according to their relevance to or even support of my question. I consider the selection and presentation of the questions and methods (included and omitted) as an optional, full or partial, model for future research options, rather than a conclusive all encompassing example. I've altered the format and order of questions for reading ease. All research forms are included in the appendix for further scrutiny.

The Discussion: About the research

Online Surveys

My survey had many essay boxes for essay questions and also for clarification of other questions. I consider the issues of factors of time, communication skills, patience, and motivation involved with long, short, linguistically elaborate, and/or simple responses. I greet them, and politely ask them to leave. I asked a question of my participants, through their expression at a particular time and place; they chose an answer. I see their answer as an answer of the self for that time and place.

The online survey inquired upon a wide range of topics, some engaged, some omitted due to limited space. The regrettable editing of quantitative questions (e.g., how many hours do you spend? how much money do you spend?) would have added to the web of deep understanding of the participants.

Children's Surveys (drawing)

I distributed a drawing and word prompt survey to a group of elementary school children participating in an after-school program. After very brief instructions, I distributed my survey as the children finished snack time. Because of the age range (5-10), and overlapping of activities, many personalized directions followed and varied as per student. Program supervisors helped with distribution and explanation. I advised the supervisors to refrain from leading answers, as my interest lie in how the children understood and chose to complete the survey.

I was not concerned with mediums used. Children were situated at long lunch-room benches and materials were brought to them, so they may not have made color choices but rather used whatever rolled in front of them. Though, in a quick flip through the twenty-eight surveys, I did initially take interest in color. Regardless, I do not go into a deep meaning as per color, but rather a comparison of color used for different questions on the same survey.

The engagement could have been improved by further interaction with each child. I could have asked them why they drew what they drew, or even, *what* they drew. Upon reflection I wondered if participants could be confused by the word “me” as to whether it meant them, or “me, the researcher.”

Interviews

The interview portions were my first attempt at data collection through participant interaction. I conducted ten semi-structured interviews. As I developed other means of data collection, they and the direction of my interviews were no doubt affected by developments in other research. I tried to follow a list of questions, though based on previous responses some scripted questions were redundant while additional questions often appeared. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

Drawing Surveys (adult), not included in engagement

Because of my limited time to wrangle and collect all responses, as well as unsuccessfully distributing to non-interviewed participants, I chose to omit this small sample (five) of drawings from the analysis. Instead I direct readers to sections which engage children’s drawings, as I would have approached these similarly. The survey form is listed in the appendix.

Children's Surveys (word prompt), not included in engagement

The children's survey word prompts were similar to "list" questions in the online survey, except that they omitted the word "your" (e.g., "tell me about 'your' food"). I propose similar engagement. Survey is found in the appendix.

Discussion: The engagement

As previously noted, the engagement features a delicate weave of findings and discussion. A theoretical bouquet beckons methodological engagement exercising reflective researcher narration a means through the unavoidably overlapping themes: self, nature, food, home, yard, garden, and community. Diagrams are presented following some engagements to illuminate the path.

Self

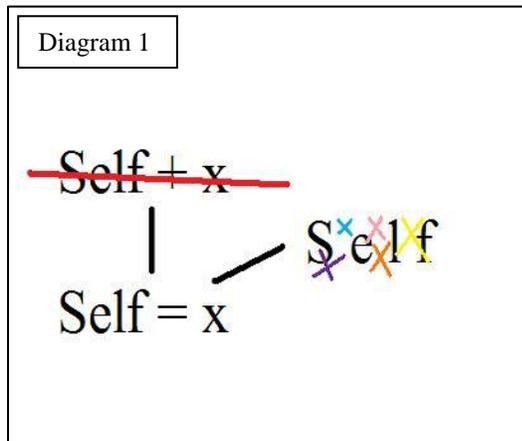
"I am a farmer's wife"

Anonymous response, Online survey, 2012

Self is a major component of this paper which I chose to understand mainly through self and x. I approached self exclusively in the online survey and asked: "Tell me about yourself." I may refer to this question and others of similar format as "tell me" questions. Of the nineteen survey respondents, all but one answered this question. Of those responding, eight mentioned Canton, or "this town"; sixteen mentioned family; five mentioned education; thirteen mentioned occupation; five mentioned leisure, hobbies, loves, enjoyment, etc.; six mentioned age; one mentioned religion; one mentioned feelings, personality traits; and one mentioned environment.

In this case, I did not even have to prompt the x in search of the "and"—the +. When asked to talk about themselves, the participants talked about x—a self chosen x. An x I tried to separate in this question, only to be thrust together in participant response. Perhaps, "Tell me about yourself", through everyday life, has lost the literal meaning assigned to it. I could have altered the order and forced the participant to read each word in a new, less clichéd way: "tell me about

the self that is you.” Regardless, when asked to “tell me about yourself”, most participants chose to either utilize x or perhaps scream back: “I am x! X is me!” (Diagram 1)



If these participant comments are indeed screaming representations of selves and x’s—as one, then it could be said that participants are “empty nesters”; a German homestead in Iowa; marriage to a “full of love man”; mother of a convicted felon; a Master’s Degree in Education; love of sports movies and tv; dismay towards lagging community projects; “mother of 2”; and a small business owner. Some told a story, with many words and many “x”s. Some were simple, their “x”s few: “I am a working wife/mother.”

If working, wife, and mother are expressed as an x of self, and if another participant (self) is unmarried, unemployed, and childless, what self are they to the former participant? A self defined as “x”s, reconsiders the + as completely relative and unique to each self, which elicits a different platform for =, and understandings of = and community. This reshaping shakes standard explorations within self, and between self and other. It would strengthen the necessity for individual investigations, legitimizing the journey of self through my equation, carefully redefined as per participant.

Nature

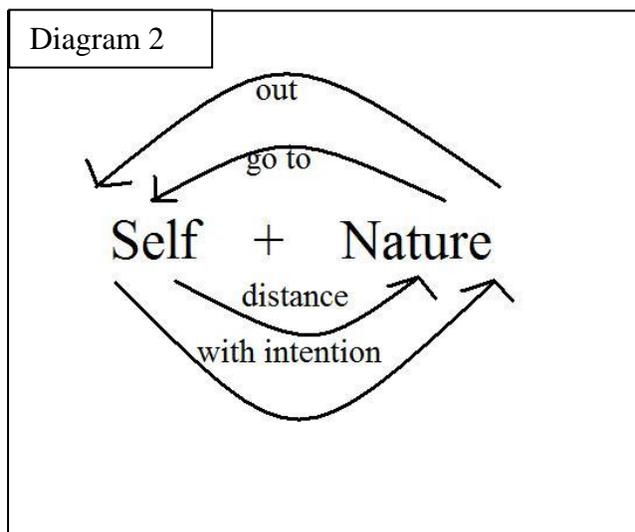
“I believe that the earth is a gift”

“I love it.”

Anonymous responses, Online survey, 2012

In the online survey, I asked: “Tell me about nature”. I paid attention to word choices as well as sentence structure. I noticed the reoccurring themes as participants placed themselves outside of nature or [at least temporarily] within nature; described or defined nature; mentioned importance and qualities; expressed wants, shortcomings, or gave advice; or expressed a need to take care of nature or work for nature.

I interpreted participants placing themselves outside of nature or [at least temporarily] within nature in a few examples. “I love spending time outdoors in nature...So many sights, sounds and smells surround us in nature.” This comment links nature with the outdoors, the sentence suggests the participant goes outdoors to reach nature where, then, the senses are surrounded. Now consider the following: “I love the outdoors, anytime of the year, I spend as much time as I can outside”; “I love being out in nature...”; “I enjoy being outdoors...” These comments, again, place nature “out” and not-nature “in”. Nature is a place you go with intention. “The place where I get to explore nature the most is at our lake cabin in Minnesota...”; “I love traveling to see everything I can in nature” These responses place nature, or at least a preferred nature, achievable only after covering some distance. (Diagram 2)

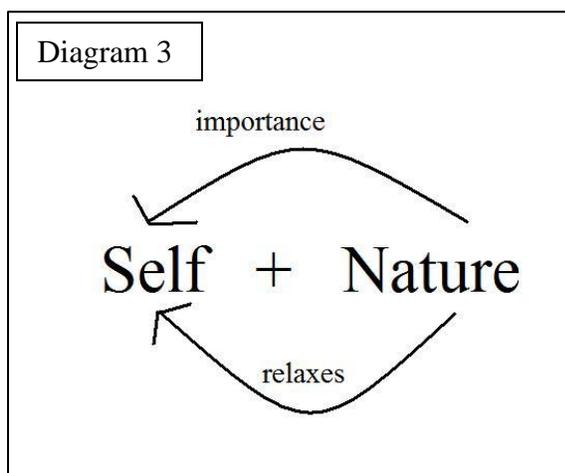


My own presumptions and subsequent question construction may have prevented participants from expressing nature as they perceive it. As Gooch explores in *At the Tail of the Buffalo: Van*

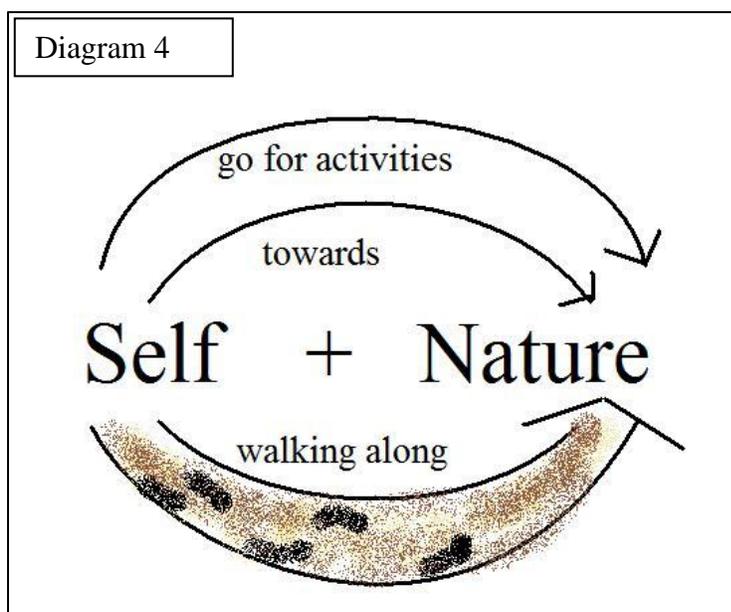
Gujjar pastoralists between the forest and the world arena, “Van Gujjars have to their world of forest and mountains, seeing them not as specimens of rare and exotic, indigenous Others, but as a way of *being-humans-in-the-world*” (1998, 83). If the participants from Canton saw themselves and their nature, food, or home as a way of being in the world, I did not make space for them to express that embrace, if a response of that view is even possible with words, through methods employed. The comments of description and definition such as: “It is beautiful...”, “Refreshing; Beautiful; Ever-changing; peaceful; variety; awesome; Spiritual” may have avoided this dilemma, while voicing descriptions of nature without so explicitly placing oneself in, out, or away from nature.

I kept my survey prompts short and vague, intentionally. I did not anticipate that participants would describe *human* nature: “Nature is a force which we have little to no control of, be it human nature or mother nature.”

Others voiced nature’s importance or qualities: “Nature is very important to me...” “Listening to the leaves rustle as the wind blows is a relaxing sound.” (Diagram 3) One participant drew relationships for me. The comment “I...understand the relationship between people and food” voiced an awareness of self + x as well as providing the x, food, despite a nature prompt, which could imply the participant feels food is an interchangeable or inseparable x with nature.

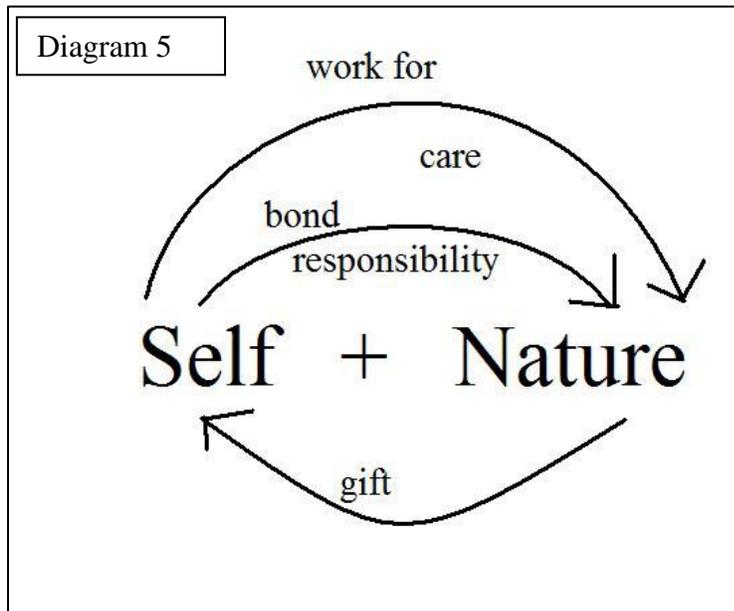


Many expressed wants, shortcomings, or gave advice: “having outdoor activities would be great”; “I want to rollerblade on a path not a rocky street!”; “feel we are limited in this community as to where we can spend time outside.” In the online survey the question [to be discussed later]: “What improvements or changes would you like to see in this community” was placed before, and proximal to this question which may have led participants to engage this survey as a glorified community improvement comment box. I asked many questions about many things resulting in a jumble of questions capable of influencing or guiding the participant in directions they may not have gone had the questions been placed otherwise or omitted. This possibility does not eliminate the interest of the responses. These participants saw the word “nature” as an appropriate lead to voice these concerns of “outdoor activities”, paths, limited “outdoor places” in the community—suggesting nature is a place where a self went for activities, constructed paths, and “outdoor places”. These responses lead me to understand the participants’ “+”s more resemble literal paths: a self indoors, walking along + towards a self in nature, a self towards x. (Diagram 4)

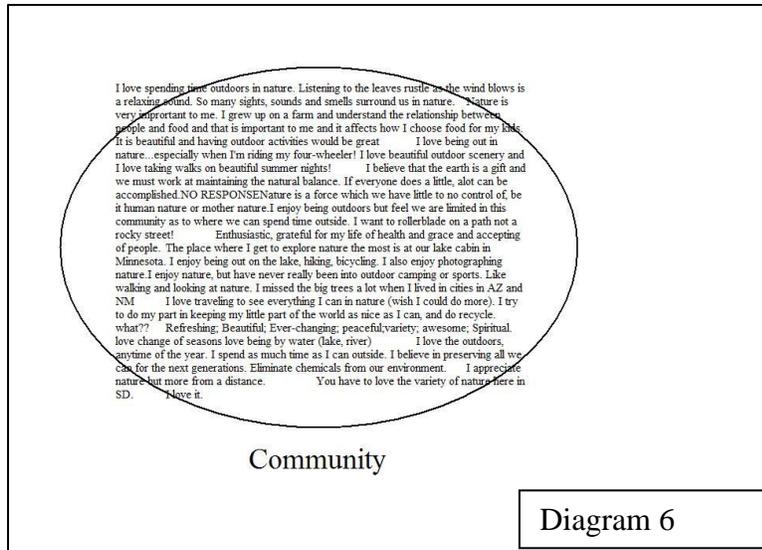


Some also expressed a need to take care of nature or work for nature: “If everyone does a little, a lot can be accomplished”; “I believe that the earth is a gift and we must work at maintaining the natural balance”; “I try to do my part in keeping my little part of the world as nice as I can, and do recycle”; “I believe in preserving all that we can for the next generations. Eliminate chemicals

from our environment.” These comments suggest + as less of a path and more of a bond or responsibility towards nature, towards x. (Diagram 5)



Finally, I transferred all of the participant responses from this “tell me” question from a table to a text document in order to easily navigate the words, side by side. In transfer, the format defaulted. All of the responses transferred as one large, seeping paragraph, a glob of *telling-about-nature*—with many different desires, descriptions, and narrators speaking all at once, how can a sense of community, from participants, be achieved? How can an understanding of community, by researcher, be gained? Despite their diversity, they *are* present in and part of one continuous and convoluted story—one community. (Diagram 6)



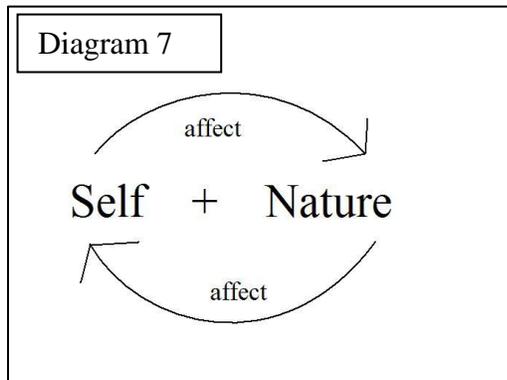
Also in the online survey, I asked participants to rate the following five statements: “I am part of nature”; “I affect nature”; “Nature affects me”; “I help nature”; “Nature helps me”. Ratings choices were: “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree”, or “strongly agree.”

This rating question was more explicit than the “tell me” questions, but ultimately after the same thing—a glimpse into the participants, the selves of Canton’s perceptions of themselves in relation to aspects of the world. For the statement, “I am part of nature,” six participants strongly agreed; eight participants agreed; three participants chose neutral; zero participants disagreed; one participant strongly disagreed; and one did not answer.

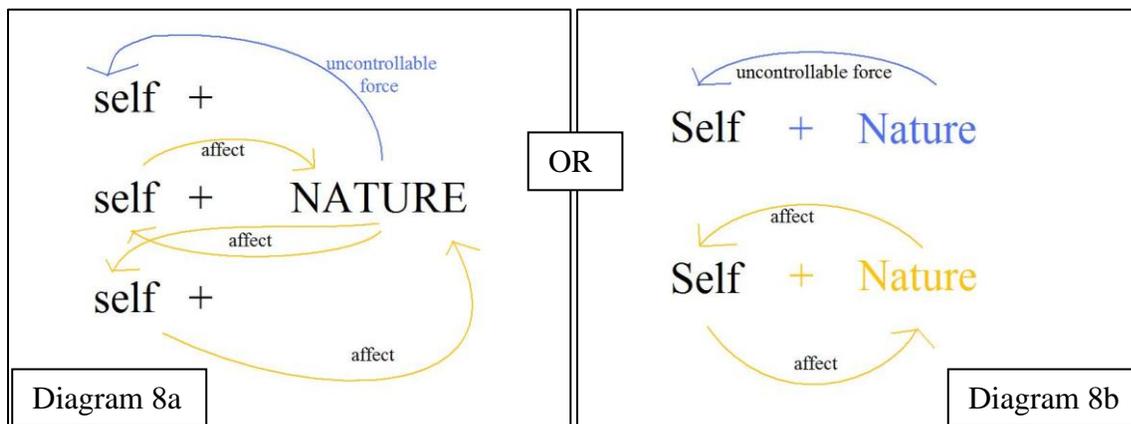
For the question, “I affect nature”, eight participants strongly agreed; seven participants agreed; one participant chose neutral; one participant disagreed; two participants strongly disagreed; and all answered. Although the majority of my participants chose “agree” or “strongly agree”, three of nineteen still chose the other end of the spectrum (i.e., “disagree” or “strongly disagree”). If this represents their perception and they feel the opposite, it displays a range of selves in this community. A community not defined by shared relationships towards their perceived affect upon, or power over, nature. A community not described by a shared +.

For the question, “Nature affects me,” ten participants strongly agreed; eight participants agreed; zero participants chose neutral; zero participants disagreed; one participant strongly disagreed;

and all answered. Of the eighteen answering “agree” or “strongly agree”, fifteen also agreed or strongly agreed to: “I affect nature.” This reciprocal affect could suggest a relationship wherein both affect, and feel effects, a two way + of action upon both self and x. (Diagram 7)



Only two participants drastically changed position. One participant disagreed with, “I affect nature,” while strongly agreeing with “Nature affects me”, suggesting a feeling of effects. This expression was expanded in the participant’s response to “Tell me about nature”: “Nature is a force which we have little to no control of, be it human nature or mother nature.” Does nature (x) affect or extend a different + towards this particular self? (Diagram 8a) Or does this particular self experience a different x—a different nature—thus altering the subsequent +. (Diagram 8b) The second participant to drastically change position of affect strongly disagreed with “I affect nature”, and agreed with “Nature affects me”. This participant’s “Tell me about nature” though, was slightly less telling: “love change of seasons love being by water (lake, river).”



When asked to rate “I help nature”, some participants were more on the fence with five choosing “neutral.” Four answered “strongly agree”; eight agreed; one disagreed; and one strongly disagreed. The participants answering “disagree” and “strongly disagree” also answered similarly

to “I affect nature.” They expressed that they do not affect nature, nor help it. This perception suggests a non-communicative relationship with nature and on a larger environmental and sustainability projection, could suggest a dangerous sort of apathy towards the environment and treatment thereof.

Three of the five participants answering “neutral” to, “I help nature” answered “agree” for all other statements (including the next statement of discussion: “Nature helps me.”) I propose this as an awareness of the mutual permeability between self (themselves) and x (nature), but at the same time, an uncertainty of their capabilities or behaviors. An additional question of, “I *can* help nature” would have been useful to distinguish a participant’s perception of their ability from perception of their actions.

In the final rating “Nature helps me”, nine participants strongly agreed; seven participants agreed; one participant chose “neutral”; zero participants chose “disagree”; and two participants strongly disagreed. This spread, with answers concentrating around “agree” and “strongly agree”, resembles answers from “Nature affects me”; “I affect nature”; and “I am part of nature.” I note the interest, not between these statements, but in their combination. In multiple questions swapping position and affect of self and nature, twelve participants never chose “neutral.” Of the seven participants choosing “neutral” only one chose it more than once. This lack of neutrality, suggests weighted perceptions of the affect, non-affect, connections, or disconnectedness, between nature and self, despite the arrangements of x and self or the direction of +.

At the end of this rating portion, three of the nineteen participants left additional comments. One of which responding, “strongly disagree” to all rating prompts wrote: “I have a print of Chief Seattle with a tear on his face as he is viewing the earth. I acquired it 20 or more years ago and it is speaking to me strongly today”; another agreed to all prompts and offered: “we recycle, garden, help out@the farm when asked, I feel better when I’m outside in the sun or shoveling snow, it takes the blues away.” Both participants offered comments of sentimentality yet with drastically different ratings. Both participants connected a self with x, through an emotional +; though contrasted in rated affect of x and perceived ability to help.

I approached nature through twenty-eight children's drawings of, "Me & Nature". I administered and oversaw the completion of the children's surveys, during which I overheard children asking, "What is nature?" I questioned my word choice. At what age do children know the word nature? How does it exist prior to namesake? Are the paths between nature and self blurred before this namesake? This flood of questions did not destroy the samples, but rather reassured me that the inclusion of the term, and the dilemma it conjured, is in fact critical and rousing in an exploration of selves.

In the children's drawings, I noted the following reoccurring features: sixteen children included a smile in their drawing; nineteen drew a tree; ten included animals; three drew a scene suggesting danger, adventure or activity; two drew water; four drew a sun; seven drew grass, flowers, or plantlike images; and twenty-four drew a humanlike figure. Further engagement is discussed in the home section, through dialogue between the responses: "Me and Nature" and "Me and Home."

Food

I inquired about food through several methods. Food was intended as an x in itself. Though, through engagement I discovered it to bend, shift, and fuse. Many methods which incorporated food were regrettably cut, though food, as x, in other methods could give a projection of the capabilities of engagement. Sometimes food was inherent in discussions of gardening or nature. It was explicitly so, in the next question of engagement from the online survey: "Tell me about your food". First, I was curious about how participants' answers about this x compared to their answers about self and other "x"s; such as nature, home, or yard. I regret my word choice of "your". This word may have severely limited a participant's perceived freedom of response. It may have discouraged responses about food systems, food in general, food shortages, etc. while supporting responses describing participants' food. By using "your" I already implied a possession or ownership over food. If a participant were to perceive themselves as one with nature and food as part of nature, it would be difficult for them to express a food they own, if they do not perceive or acknowledge this ownership over nature, and thus food. This reflection demonstrates inescapable researcher subjectivities in method design.

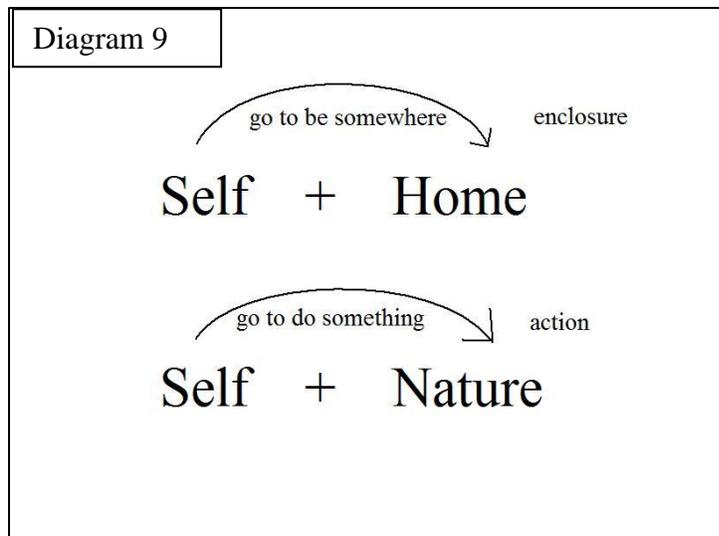
Answers related to diet, foods they liked, didn't like; cooked; didn't cook. Two respondents referred to the source of their food: "It is usually home cooked and from natural sources"; "We raise most of our vegetables in our organic garden." Some answers expressed regret, "we eat too much junk". While others offer a sort of motive on food: "I try to choose and prepare more whole foods...for my kids because I think they are healthier for them. It also helps them understand the foods that they eat and the food choices they make." Only one responded with more abstract descriptors: "variety; fun, delicious, creativity, experimental; satisfying."

Home

In the children's surveys, I prompted children to draw "Me and Home." Select findings are as follows: fourteen children drew a person or people; twenty drew a house like structure; three drew an animal; eleven drew a smile; five drew a person inside of the structure; and nine drew a person outside of the structure. I find it more useful to discuss participants' home and nature drawings together. Aware of the subjective and assumptive nature of drawing analysis, I've included the drawings in the appendix so that future researchers may follow and criticize my engagement using the original drawings. If something resembles something, I call it as such as to eliminate excessive, overwhelming safety descriptors. (e.g., "house-like figure", *house*) The attached pictures, labeled Drawing A-E, leave my assumptions open to interpretation.

Drawing A

This participant included a substantially more detailed drawing for nature, than for home. The drawing of nature suggests adventure, danger or action. Two human figures are very close to an animal figure, both surrounded by trees and all above what appears to be a river with two fish, one large [mouth open] one small. The same child's "Me & Home" picture is a small, almost centered house consisting of one window, a door, and a roof. A figure is in window. This drawing may suggest nature is somewhere to *go to do* something—a relationship of action; where home is a thing (house) to *go to be* somewhere—a relationship of enclosure. (Diagram 9)

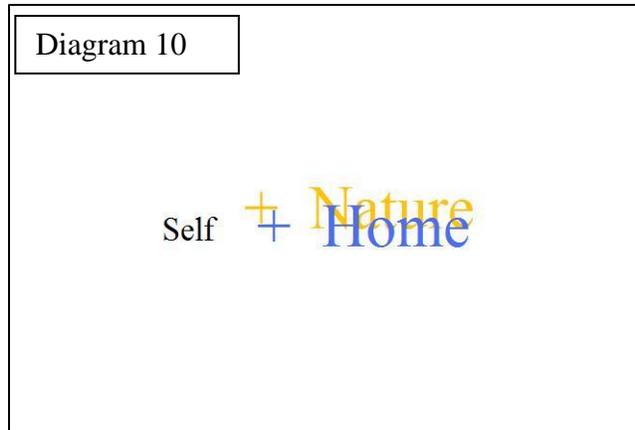


Drawing B

I engaged Drawing B similarly. The participant drew several figures for nature while merely drawing a human figure in a box for home. The nature drawing suggests action, with a horizontal figure, seemingly flying through the sky. The main feature in the home drawing is the smiling human inside the box.

Drawing C

This participant's home and nature drawing are tangled and overlapping. Trees are visible in the nature space, while house details are visible in the home space. There is a figure connecting the two extending from a roof like figure into an arch of trees. The arch also seems to be encompassed by a roof. No human figure is visible. I can't be sure which space the participant completed first, therefore which x the participant encroached upon the other. I avoid a discussion of motives, and rather point out that the overlap was made and separate spaces were not acknowledged for this survey. If the drawing is a component of representation in an understanding of self and "x"s, this participant's (expression of) "x"s shared space and were more dominant, space-wise, than the participant's expression of self. (Diagram 10)



Drawing D

This participant included words in their drawing of nature. The drawing featured a human figure, a tree, and two birds. The human, through dialogue bubble, says “I’ll help”. This comment may suggest the child’s perception of their place in, relationship to, or affect from/on nature. With nature represented by x, the + of this participant’s equation as per this expression may be interpreted as an “I help nature” relationship.

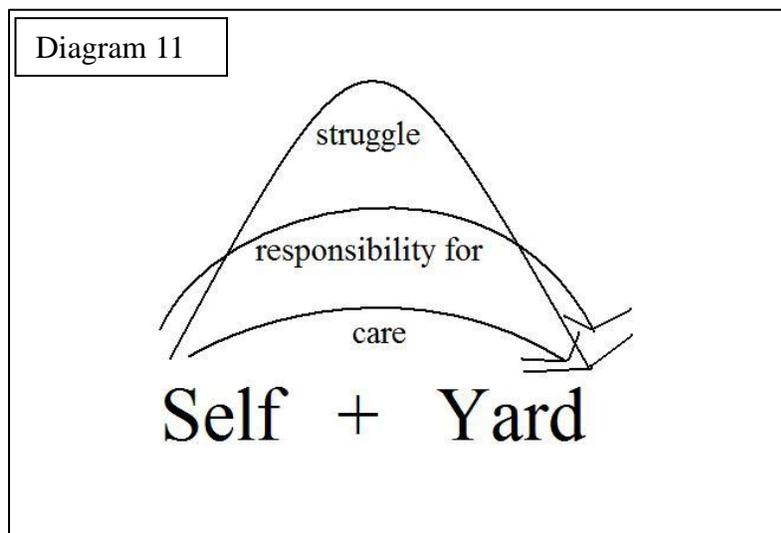
Drawing E

Drawing E stood out through its contrast between the nature and home drawings’ color intensities and complexities. The participant filled in the nature entry’s background (the foreground was a tree with fruit, a human figure, a sun, a plant, and a rainbow); whereas the participant left the background white for the home drawing. The foreground of the home drawing included three objects, a human, an animal, and a step like figure, compared to nature’s five objects. The increased number of objects and stronger color saturation and fullness could suggest nature is a full or colorful place, a place more easily (or more enjoyably?) expressed in drawing. Both drawings featured smiling humans.

The collection of drawings from children offered a chance to explore relationships of self, nature, and home but connections to community were not engaged directly. I have not drawn connections to community, but rather see this portion as an alternative method to investigate the self + x in preparation for or supplement to later engagement with community.

Yard

Yard, much like food, shifted and fused. It often was not without reference to nature, home, or other “x”s. Regardless, the + was explored and engaged. In the online survey I asked participants: “Tell me about your yard.” Participants commented on content, size, activities, sun, desires, and cost. Two comments elicited suggestion of relationship of care or guidance, “not well manicured or groomed neglected flower gardens”; “because we aren’t in either place enough to take care of it!”; “We struggle with our yard”; comments not so far from previous comments of + suggesting a relationship of preservation or responsibility. (Diagram 11)

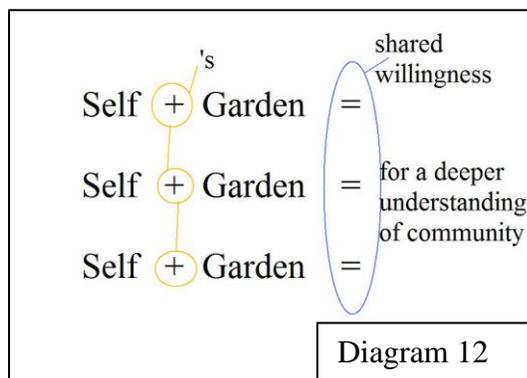


In the online survey, I also asked: “Please list 5-10 words about your yard.” Again, I regret my usage of the word “your.” Of the nineteen surveyed, two answered in phrase or sentence form; ten answered in list form; seven either did not respond or referred to previous “tell me questions.” Four participants described items from their yard; six described the status (e.g., “landscaped”, “neglected”); six commented on size; eight used various descriptors, (e.g., “green”, “beautiful”, “functional”, “spacious”); two offered a self statement: “I don’t worry about my yard ‘looking perfect’,” and “It is not a place of comfort for me.” The list version of this question limited participants and I found it more difficult to explore relationships through. A more advanced method of word choice analysis would have enhanced engagement with this question.

Garden

Utilizing garden as x was also difficult. Here, I tended to group it with nature and discuss it with community. Therefore, here the engagement related to garden is discussed in relation to community and then revisited in the community section.

Of the nineteen online survey participants, thirteen indicated they had a garden. I asked the question: “Would you be willing to increase the size of your garden for community purposes?” Participants were given an essay box in which to answer, leaving it open for “yes,” “no,” “maybe,” as well as alternative or explanatory responses. Of the thirteen participants with a garden, three answered “yes”; six answered “no”; one answered “maybe”; one answered “unsure”; two responded with explanations: “since I don't do anything with the garden, I don't know what to answer, but I am sure the answer would be no, as I can't imagine they would have time to take care of it, if it gets much bigger!” I later asked, “If unwilling to either of the above, what if anything, would increase your willingness?” Receiving the responses: “?”; “nothing”; “yes”; and two explanations: “Plant enough for other people to harvest” and “nothing in my yard, worked too hard & long for it!” This question about donation and willingness was an attempt to understand participants through $=$. I'm not convinced that willingness represents selves + towards garden. Had I isolated the + of self and garden, (i.e., “Tell me about garden”) I could have engaged the selves through their expression of relation to garden. But, if + is possessive; x is easily substitutable with other worldly aspects; and if willingness instead finds a place in $=$, then if the many selves of Canton, despite their +, expressed a shared $=$ (e.g., willingness, unwillingness) for community, a deeper understanding of community would present itself—thus the motivation for this and subsequent questions about willingness and donations. (Diagram 12)



I also asked four participants with yards, but no garden, if they would donate a portion of their yard to be used for a garden for a community food drive. Two answered “yes”; and two did not respond. Showing at least some of those not involved in gardening themselves would part with a portion of their yard for the community. I looked more closely at previous responses of the two participants that answered “yes” to this question. The participants told about nature as follows: “Nature is a force which we have little to no control of, be it human nature or mother nature” and, “I appreciate nature but more from a distance” One suggesting helplessness, the other space between—both very different versions of + and x.

During the semi-structured interviews I asked participants their opinions on personal gardens. Again, It was difficult to explore garden as an x not obviously bound to or within other “x”s or in explicit = to community. Five of the ten participants’ responses were dominated by reference to family or family stories: “so important to families,” “they’d come in the house with dirt around their mouth(...)they’d been out picking carrots and eating them”, “my mom was all into that, she grew up during WW2.” Three participants referred to work, time, or talent involved or in the way of gardening. The responses bring to light a dimension of understanding self and community, another x, I could have explored, *family*. One participant also explicitly tied gardening to food and the environment, “anything you can do to obviously eliminate your carbon footprint in the world is a good thing. Even by simply producing your own [food].”

Community

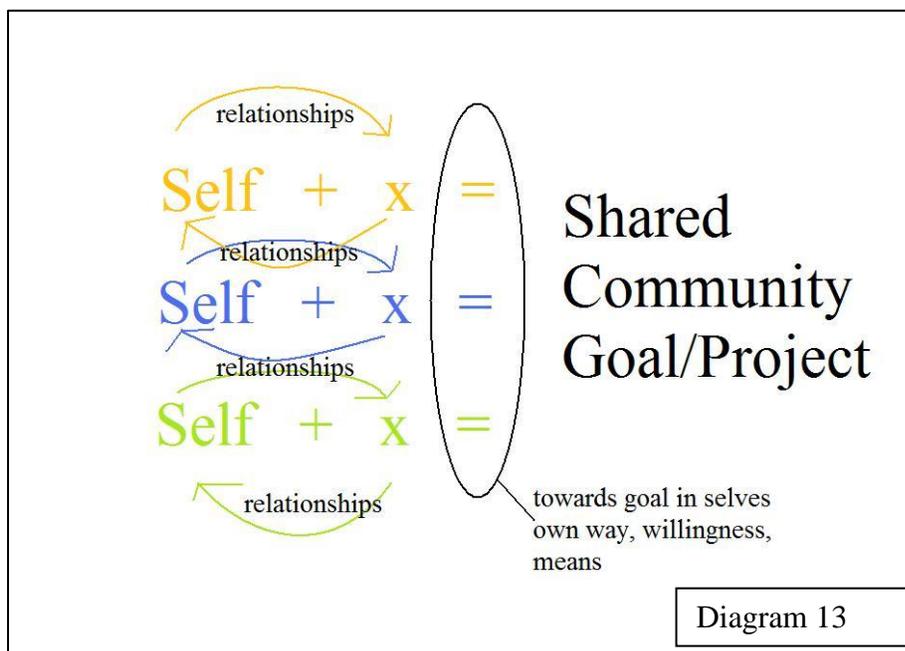
The community questions were loaded and more difficult to analyze. The multiple aspects were less easily attributed to components of my equation. From this fluidity, emerged deep understanding through interesting relationships and awareness of additional components.

I asked participants in the online survey, “What improvements or changes would you like to see in this community?” Of the nineteen participants, five did not respond to this question. Of the responses some concrete suggestions: “...a community center would be ideal,” “more public parks,” and “we need recreational facilities, a walking path and tennis courts (and of course the pool needs to be renovated!!). Eight mentioned swimming pool; four mentioned a senior citizen center; two mentioned parks; three mentioned other centers; three mentioned walking path/bike

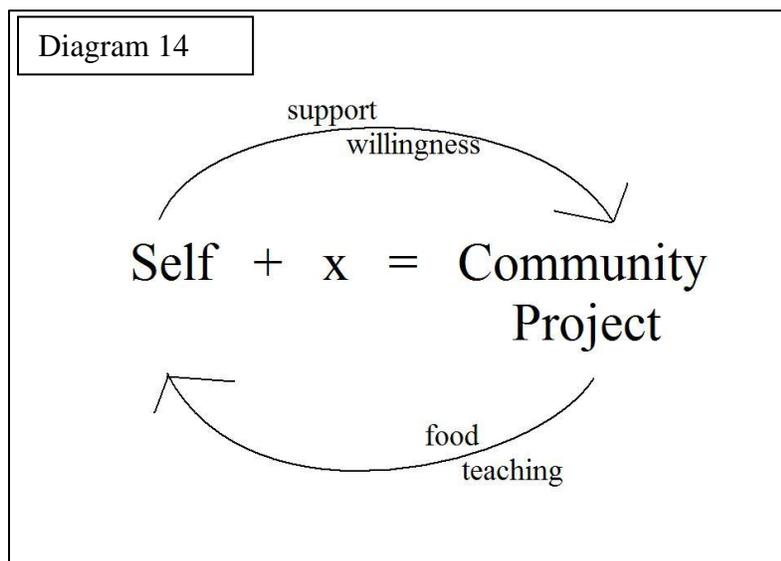
trails; and five mentioned issues of youth or young adults. Though more vague and abstract goals were also present, “An increased sense of community, an identity independent from Sioux Falls,” “more entertainment,” and “It would be nice to see people join together to work on project. Not just a few people. A sense of community is lacking.”

Considering the abstract comments of desired change: “identity” and “sense of community”, I wonder how the participants would imagine these changes occurring? Through the many selves acting upon the community? If the participants desire a sense of community identity among the many selves of Canton what does this mean for the community of self + x = ___ relationships?

Despite the many theories, methods, and selves of Canton, can community be understood? I can't help but notice how effortlessly participant demands could contribute to the abstract desire for a sense of community. Many of the suggestions (e.g., walking path, pool, community center) would bring members of the community together in the planning, development, construction, as well as the final product—the enjoyment of the desires. Perhaps, it is not uniform self + x = ___ relationships, but rather compatible goals, similar “___”s, attainable through diverse self + x individuals. (Diagram 13) The many selves and, from, despite their respective relationships with many worldly aspects, move towards a shared goal through a willingness, donation, means or (=) unique to their self + x.



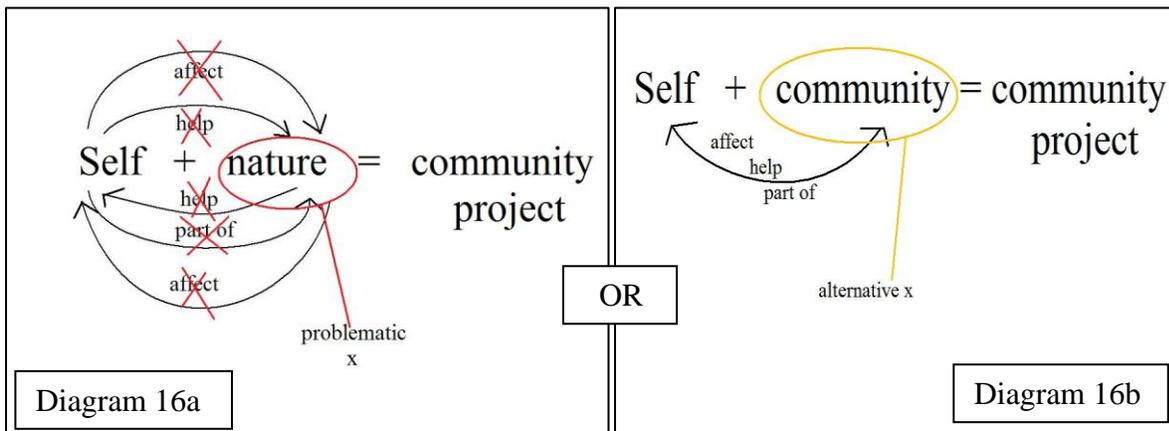
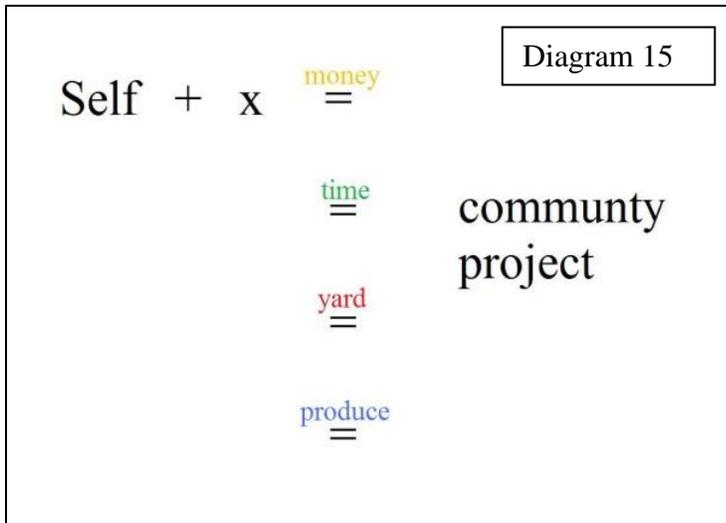
During interviews, I asked participants about their opinions towards community gardens. I framed this question to explore participants' selves and their + with an x, garden, as pertains to (=), the community, through a project. Seven participants gave descriptions of quality (e.g., “fantastic”, “important”, “cool”, “really nice”); seven gave examples of community garden projects; seven participants elaborated the equation by including other selves, (e.g., “excellent forum for folks,” “uses for people,” “good for people.”) Five of the previous offered both examples and other selves. The comment, “teaches people” illustrates the back-and-forth abilities of the journey from self in relation to x towards community. Selves with their perceptions and relations support (=) the community project wherein the community project returns (=) various “x”s (e.g., garden, food) to selves. (Diagram 14)



In the online survey, I investigated the =, as previously illustrated, by asking: “What would you be willing to donate for a community garden project? Check all that apply: Money; Time; Yard; I would not be willing to donate any of the above; comments, clarifications, other.” Eight participants responded “Money”; four responded “Time”; five responded “Yard”; two were not willing to donate any of the above; two did not respond. (Diagram 15, p.44)

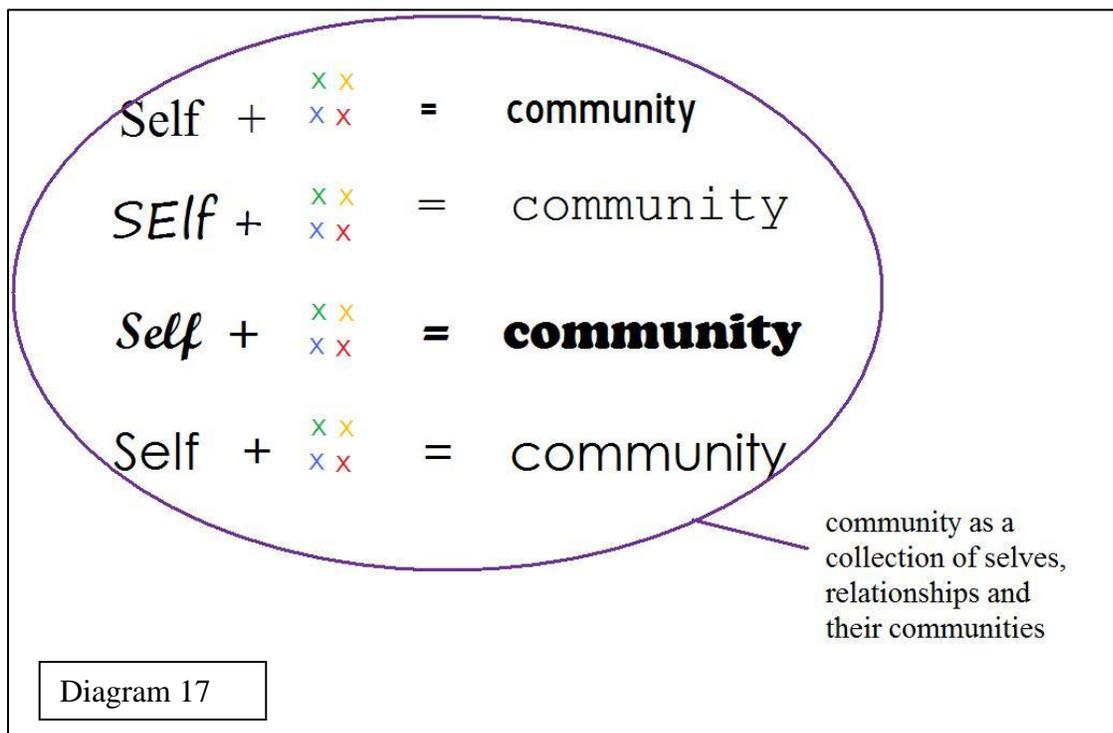
Out of nineteen participants fourteen were willing to donate something towards the community project (including one participant offering produce.) One of the two participants unwilling to donate any of the above strongly disagreed with all statements: “I am part of nature”; “I affect

nature”; “Nature affects me”; “I help nature”; and “Nature helps me”. This uniform strong disagreement could express a curious +, but perhaps it is in fact a problematic x, for the case of this participant. (Diagram 16a) If using nature as a means to explore participant’s relationship towards community is indeed problematic, an engagement and understanding of community as x and the subsequent self + community could then be used to explore participant’s unwillingness, or willingness towards the community project. (Diagram 16b) Unwillingness could also be attributed to the proposed project; proposing several community goals would begin to address this possibility. These glitches highlight the advantage of an organic exploration and engagement with relationships of many aspects for community understanding.



A walk along this path of perceptions, selves and their relation to worldly aspects, with my equation as a map, and diagrams as signs of clarification brings us to an interesting view of community. Participants expressed their many selves with worldly aspects, through their relation to worldly aspects, even *as* worldly aspects. An exploration of affect and position let participants express their + with nature, accenting yet another view of self as well as relative and unique “+”s. Participants expressed additional worldly aspects in relation to themselves, other aspects, and community. This investigation highlights two main means to community understanding. Self and relationships to worldly aspects were developed and then applied to participants’ willingness towards a community project suggesting shared willingness, or shared unwillingness, as the glimpse of community from many selves. (Diagram 17)

Finally, in consideration of the many preliminary jaunts and attempted journeys of this paper through the many selves of community; their expressions of diverse relationship dispositions; and those relationship characteristics towards, sometimes blurred and personalized worldly aspects, a community is felt through, in summation and organic consideration, of these complexities—as a community more deeply understood through a collection of individual investigations focusing on the delicate relationships of many selves.



Conclusion

Beautiful Complications

“There seems to be something like Gresham’s law of cultural evolution according to which the oversimplified ideas will always displace the sophisticated and the vulgar and hateful will always displace the beautiful. And yet the beautiful persists.”

(Bateson 1980, 5)

I recognized the complicated nature of this research question—elements of which, independently spur piles of debate. I also recognized the paralysis this could elicit. My approach, though frenzied and limited, was nonetheless a worthy adventure through the perils of interdisciplinary human-world understanding. This paper explored perception and individuals’ relationships with worldly aspects, within a community, approaching a community understanding by asking:

What can I understand about individuals [of Canton] through their expressions of self, and self and/in relation to various worldly aspects: nature, food, yard, home, garden? And through these individual understandings, what can I understand about their community?

The exploration was qualitative, deeply individual in method, yet mined for community understanding in theory and engagement. My position as a researcher from the community of study brought issues of value and subjectivity which I also showed benefit the research by attending to issues of power and cultural schemas. My place in the community also contributed to the exploration and engagement by instigating heightened sensitivity to methods in order to keep tabs on the tendencies of my association.

I approached this association and engaged research through narrations from the participants, followed by engagement and reflection of those narrations. My narrations acknowledge participants and my own subjectivity and I presented my engagement likewise—explicitly—so that future researchers may peruse, criticize and evaluate. Through and throughout my reflection, with my own critique, I showed the usefulness in seemingly uselessness—the perks of the problematic.

With the help of my equation and diagrams I strained to represent the complexities of perception, individual, worldly aspects, relationships and community. Phenomenological tactics helped to explore the participants' self-world relationships in order to understand and describe their community. I approached my research in consideration of, but not religiously adhered to, the first steps of grounded theory. Through this approach, I was made aware of the difficulty in designating a constant or clean-cut x. Just as the process of grounded theory is described as "organic" (Suddaby 2006), so, too were the "x"s of exploration. The "nexus of external connections" (Dilthey and Betanzos 1988) were deliberated through engagement with primary data. The daunting complexities encountered, engaged, and diagramed reflect the complexities of the subject of self and world.

Engaging the complexities showed that an understanding of community requires an understanding of selves and their perceptions of independence, connectedness, or contradictory perception of both. Regardless of kinks in my own methods, I showed how an understanding of community could be approached through participants' expressions of a shared goal despite their many perceptions of self and worldly aspects. The complexity of selves, "x"s, relations between, and community as well gaps in my own exploration demonstrate the need to engage a collection of individual, flexible, reflexive, intertwined, ultimately organic understandings of participants' relationships in order to approach deep community understanding.

Contribution

My thesis explored individual perceptions and relations to worldly aspects in search of community. I've contributed an approach of methods, which I narrated and displayed, to be considered for their strengths and weaknesses. Considerations, applications, and amendments of my experience bring future researchers closer to an understanding of the complexities stirred.

This paper serves as my interdisciplinary starting point for investigation of larger issues of environmental problems, movements, and sustainability. The theoretical and methodological sampling, though superficial by necessity, demonstrates the potential with the help of more collaborative research, especially where time, funds, and space allow. This paper serves as a model of methods, theory, and engagement with which sophisticated teams, weathered

researchers, and cases can refer and either avoid or adopt in their attempts to understand levels and relationships of self and world.

Carefully, through its individual voices, it contributes a social science understanding of community which could be further developed to delicately and efficiently navigate issues such as sustainability, transition, or low energy futures. Explorations of which are an important qualitative supplement to quantitative evaluations of communities—a qualitative feeling of selves and community.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.1

Online survey

Thesis 2012

Dear Participant,

Thank you SO MUCH for your time.

All answers are voluntary.

By submitting this survey you are granting consent for information gained from this survey to be used for my Master's research at Lund University. All information gained will strictly be used anonymously.

You can answer all, as many, or as few questions as you like. You may quit at anytime.

I encourage you to use the extra comments boxes for any clarifications or feedback throughout the survey.

Also, I would appreciate it if you could please forward this survey link to other Canton residents.

Thanks & Enjoy!

1. Please fill in the following demographic information. All answers are voluntary and will only be used as reference. Demographic information will never be shared with a 3rd party.

Name:

Address:

Address 2:

City/Town:

State:

ZIP:

Email Address:

2. If you provided any contact information: May I contact you with further questions or clarifications?

- Yes
- No
- N/A

Other (please specify)

3. What improvements or changes would you like to see in this Community?

4. Tell me about yourself (In any format/length).

5. Tell me about nature (In any format/length).

Thesis 2012

6. Tell me about your food (In any format/length).

7. Tell me about your yard (In any format/length).

8. Rate the following statements:

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree
I am part of nature.	<input type="radio"/>				
I affect nature.	<input type="radio"/>				
Nature affects me.	<input type="radio"/>				
I help nature.	<input type="radio"/>				
Nature helps me.	<input type="radio"/>				

comments, clarifications, other

9. How would you consider your economic situation?

- comfortable with money to spare
- comfortable
- comfortable but could use a little more
- struggling

Other (please specify)

Thesis 2012

10. Where do you obtain your food? Mark and describe all that apply.

- Local Grocery store
- Other Grocery store
- Farmers' market
- Personal Garden/garden preserves
- Other

For all marked answers please specify: name, amount, distance from home. You may also include 'other' in this box.

11. Do you have a yard?

- Yes
- No

other, comments

12. If answered YES to "Do you have a yard?"

How much time do you spend on your yard?

Spring (hrs/week)	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
Summer (hrs/week)	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
Fall (hrs/week)	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
Winter (hrs/week)	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
If you do not have a yard, write N/A	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
comments, clarifications, etc.	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>

13. How much money do you spend on your yard? per MONTH

Spring \$/month	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
Summer \$/month	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
Fall \$/month	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
Winter \$/month	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
If you do not have a yard, write N/A	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>
comments, clarifications, etc.	<input style="width: 300px; height: 15px;" type="text"/>

Thesis 2012

**14. Describe your yard maintenance?
(hired help, landscapers, independent, etc.)**

15. Do you use fertilizer, pesticides, chemicals on your yard?

Yes

No

If so, please describe (type, frequency, amount, etc.)

16. Do you have a garden?

Yes

No

Comments, Clarifications, other

17. If you answered YES to "Do you have a garden?" please answer the following

Where?

Why?

Approximate portion of yard used as garden

What is planted in your garden?

Would you be willing to increase the size of your garden for community purposes?

If willing, how much would you be willing to increase?

Would you be willing to change the content of your garden for community purposes?

If unwilling to either of the above, what, if anything, would increase your willingness?

If you do not have a garden, write N/A

Thesis 2012

18. If you answer NO to "Do you have a garden?" please answer the following

Why?

Would anything increase your willingness/desire to have a garden?

Please describe

Would you donate a portion of your yard to be used for a garden for a community food drive?

If so, how much of your total yard?

comments, clarifications, other

19. What would you be willing to donate for a community garden project? check all that apply

- Money
- Time
- Yard
- I would not be willing to donate any of the above

comments, clarifications, other

20. Please list 5-10 words about your yard:

21. Please list 5-10 words about your food:

22. Please list 5-10 words about nature:

Thesis 2012

23. Which of the following statements describes how you feel about your control of your food choices?

- very in control
- in control
- unsure
- helpless
- very helpless

Other (please describe), comments, clarifications

24. Do you wish you had more food choices?

- Yes
- No

if yes, describe

25. Rank the importance of the following aspects when considering food choice. With 1 as most important and 5/6 being the least important aspect of the list. Feel free to add a 6th "other".

Type number choice in box to the right of each aspect.

Please use each number ONLY once.

Choices	<input type="text"/>
Safety	<input type="text"/>
Local	<input type="text"/>
Sustainable farming methods	<input type="text"/>
Organic	<input type="text"/>
Other, comments	<input type="text"/>

Appendix 1.2

Children's survey (spaces omitted)

NAME: _____

DRAW:

1) Me & Nature

DRAW:

2) Me & Home

Draw:

3) Me & Food

Write: 5 words about nature:

Write: 5 words about home:

Write: 5 Words about food:

Appendix 1.3

Interview (spaces omitted)

What improvements or changes would you like to see in this Community:

Where do you grocery shop?

Please describe a typical grocery shopping week?

What are your opinions on personal Gardens:

Do you have a garden?

Yes: What sorts of things do you have in your Garden?

How do you feel about growing food?

Would you pay more, and How much more would you pay for food grown by your community?

NO I DO NOT HAVE A GARDEN: Would you like one?

What are your opinions on community gardens?

Would you support them?

What sort of support would you be willing to give? Financial? Time? Space (yard):

Appendix 1.4

Drawing survey (spaces omitted)

Please draw pictures based on the following prompts:

- 1) Me & Nature
- 2) Me & Home
- 3) Me & Food

Appendix 2

Drawing samples, A-E

Picture A

NAME

Name

DRAW:
1) Me & Nature



DRAW:
2) Me & Home



Write 2 words about nature:

Write 2 words about home:

Write 2 words about food:

Picture B

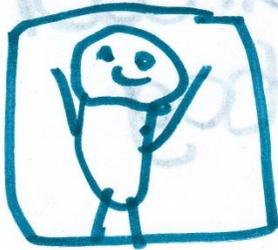
Name

NAME.

DRAW:
1) Me & Nature



DRAW:
2) Me & Home



Write: 5 words about nature:

Write: 5 words about home:

Write: 5 words about food:

Picture C



DRAW:
1) Me & Nature

DRAW:
2) Me & Home

Name

NAME:

Picture D

NAME: _____

DRAW:
1) Me & Nature



DRAW:
2) Me & Home



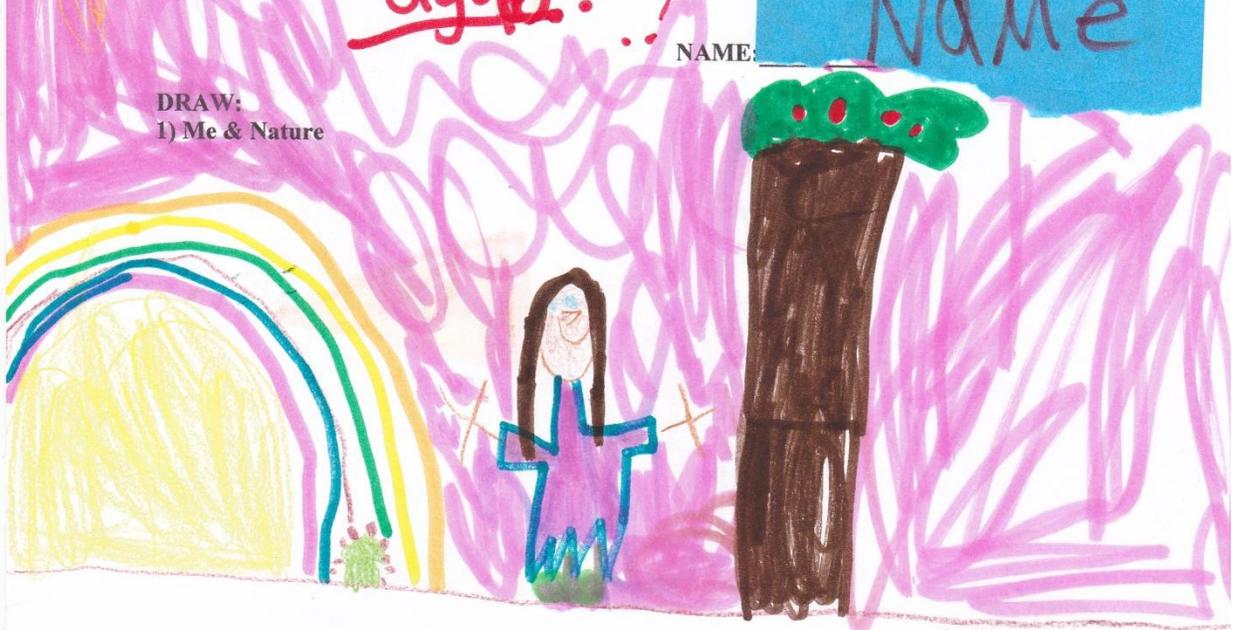
Picture E

Age!!!

NAME:

Name

DRAW:
1) Me & Nature



DRAW:
2) Me & Home

