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Understanding Community

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Abstract

The term community is used extensively in peer reviewed literature, though it is used differently by researchers across various disciplines. A better understanding of community, as an object of study, is needed to help guide policy, supports and services planning, and to build inclusive communities. This paper presents the results of a review of existing definitions published in peer-reviewed papers from various disciplines studying human behaviours and interactions. It also presents the results of focus groups with four persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities and members of their communities exploring their own definitions of community. Definitions of community extracted from the peer-reviewed literature were compared to identify common themes. Qualitative analysis revealed 13 themes, some more common than others. Focus groups transcripts were also analyzed. Themes identified in the literature review were also found in the focus groups discussion. However, a novel concept related to the notion of community as being composed of people who are unpaid to be part of this network was identified. Based on these results, a definition of community is derived to help further not only academic research in the area, but also to inform policy and practice aiming to build inclusive communities.

Keywords

Community; Definition of community; Inclusive communities; Intellectual and developmental disabilities; Supports and services planning

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Introduction

In 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007), which has now been ratified by 160 countries (United Nations, 2015), including Canada (Parliament of Canada, 2012). In 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) released guidelines recommending a community-based approach to empower persons with disabilities to access and benefit from education, employment, health, and social services (2010). Canadian provinces have introduced legislation and initiatives in an attempt to build more inclusive communities for their citizens with disabilities. For example, in 2008, Ontario enacted the *Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act* (SIPDDA, 2008), thereby engaging the province in the modernization of community-based supports and services for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. A report was recently released in British Columbia that lays out its vision to become a jurisdiction in which “disabilities are no barrier to living full lives, contributing to communities, and where no British Columbian is ever told their goals and dreams aren’t realistic because of their disability” (Government of British Columbia, 2014). Despite such legislation and initiatives to improve community-based supports and services and which emphasize the rights of persons with disabilities to live in inclusive and supportive communities,

community remains a concept that is ill-defined (Charles & Crow, 2012). The lack of consensus on the definition of community might lead to form contradictory or incompatible assumptions (Patrick & Wickizer, 1995). It also makes it difficult to study the impact of legislations, policies and services provided to persons with disabilities.

Since ancient Greek philosophy, the view of community has evolved and changed with the evolution of human interactions and behaviours. Aristotle described community as a compound of parts having functions and interests in common (Miller, 2011). However, in the 19th century, the German philosopher and sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies differentiated between community and society (1957). According to Tönnies (1957), community is represented by individuals' close social ties (e.g., family, friends and neighbours), whereas society refers to abstract associations among individuals who do not share feelings, and do not necessarily share space and time. In the 20th century, many authors have attempted to better define community (Schrecker, 2009). Nearly 100 definitions of community were identified and analyzed in the academic literature to ascertain the extent of agreement (Hillery, 1955); *people* was the only common component identified.

The goal of this paper is to better understand how the concept of community is defined to help guide policy, supports and services planning, and to build inclusive communities. To this end, a review of definitions in peer-reviewed papers from various disciplines studying human behaviours and interactions was conducted, as were focus groups exploring understanding of community among persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities and members of their support planning teams.

Method

A literature review was conducted to identify and compare existing definitions of community. In addition, the perspective of four persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities and members of their communities was explored through focus groups, as part of a larger study that was approved by the Research Ethics Boards at Queen's University, Lakehead University, and the University of Ottawa.

Literature review

A review of the peer-reviewed literature was conducted to compare definitions of community published in journals indexed in databases relevant to disciplines that have primarily taken a behavioural and social approach to understanding community (i.e., PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and Philosopher's Index). The search was also limited as follows: (1) "defin*" OR "construct*" AND "communit*" present in the abstract; (2) keywords no more than 5 words apart (e.g., "defin* near/5 communit*"); (3) published between January 1, 2003 and December 31, 2013; and (4) published in English. Studies were included when reporting a definition of community, reviewing a definition or more, or discussing the impact of study findings in terms of the definition(s) of community. Studies that examined communities in groups that are not exclusively human (e.g. in ecology or biology) were excluded.

Focus groups

This project is part of a larger study devoted to understanding the planning process and experience of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities receiving developmental services. More specifically, successes in person-directed planning (PDP) approaches to building

community capacity were studied with four individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their planning teams. A PDP approach to planning supports aims to strengthen the connections people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have with others in the community, as well as to build capacity within the community to support individuals with unique needs (Martin, Grandia, Cobigo, & Ouellette-Kuntz, early online).

Twenty people (across 3 planning teams) participated in the study, including four adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (three females and one male), two natural supports (i.e., family members), and 14 employees of agencies providing supports to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The supports needs of the participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities ranged from minimal to extensive; one of the participants used a wheelchair and had important physical impairments, one was visually impaired, and three had significant limitations in their communication abilities.

These teams participated in a series of focus groups, one of which focused on their definition or understanding of community. Participants were asked three questions: (1) *What does the word community mean to you?*; (2) *Who do you consider to be part of (name of the person with intellectual or developmental disability)'s community and why?*; and (3) *Is there anybody else who's part of (name of the person with intellectual or developmental disability)'s community and why?* The focus group session was held via videoconference; all sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Definitions of community were analyzed using a thematic content approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, the definitions extracted from the identified research papers were analyzed. The first

author divided the definitions into segments, and grouped segments that were found to be synonyms, or shared similar meaning, under the same category. Categories were then merged into themes. An independent researcher reviewed the coding structure. In addition, a senior researcher audited decision-making processes during coding, and resolved disagreements with the first author by revising, merging, and dividing categories to respect the original meaning of the data. The first author checked intra-coder agreement by coding the same segments three times, and then revising the list of segments included in each category several times.

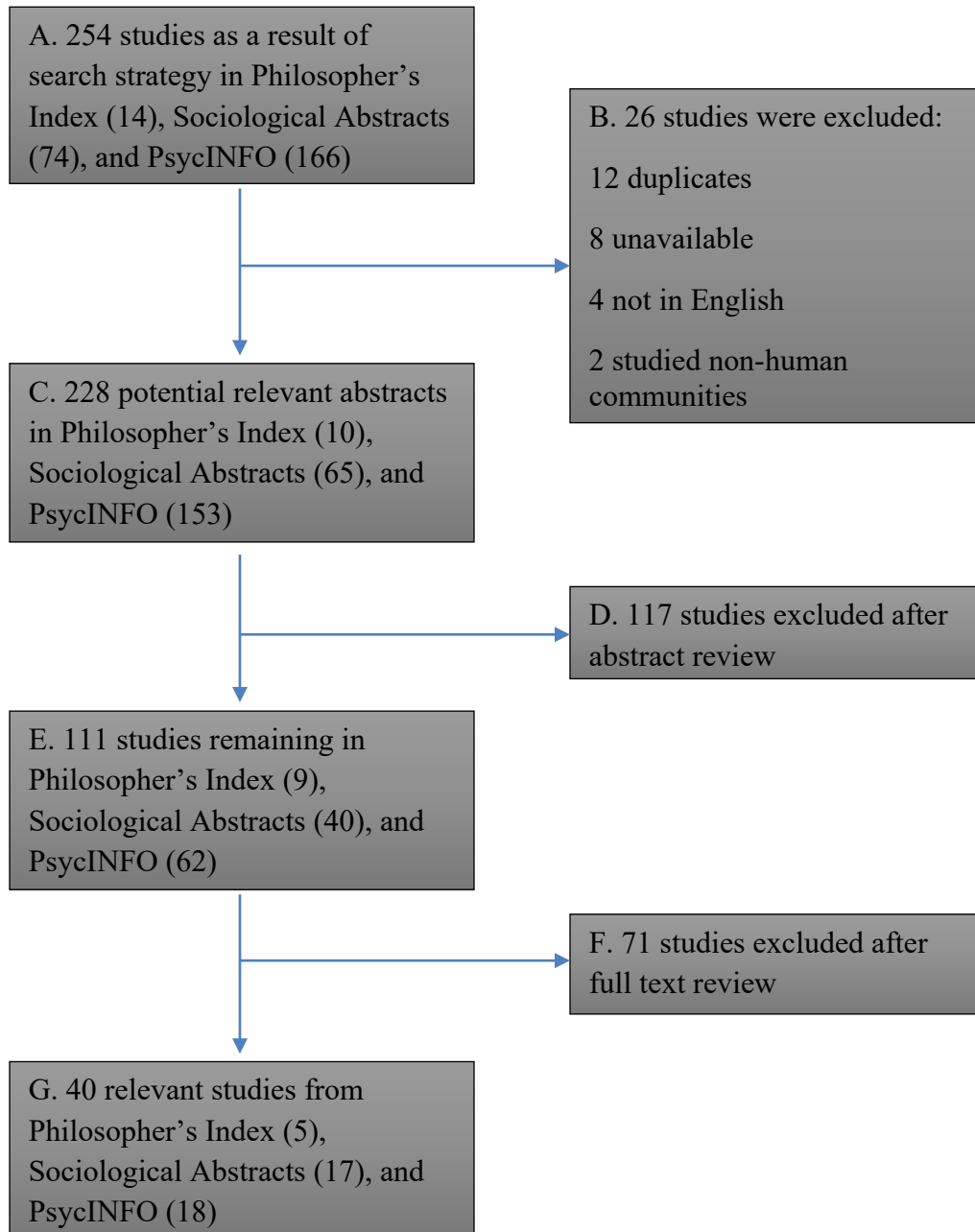
Following a framework approach (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000), the definitions extracted from the focus group discussions were coded using the categories and themes identified through the analysis of research studies; categories and themes were expanded as needed (i.e., if the meaning of a segment did not match any of the existing categories/themes).

Results

Literature Review

After applying the inclusion criteria, 40 articles that actually reported on the definitions of community were included in this study, including five from Philosopher's Index, 17 from Sociological Abstracts, and 18 from PsycINFO. Figure 1 provides detailed information on the search strategy and the number of articles excluded at each stage.

Figure 1. Selection procedure



A total of 66 definitions were extracted, from which 13 themes were identified. Some themes were reported more frequently than others in definitions across disciplines. Figure 2 shows the number of times each theme was reported across definitions and disciplines. The themes identified from most to least frequent were the following: physical proximity, shared, group, bounded, interaction, belonging, support, sustained, symbol, territory-free, process, diverse, and tangible. Table 1 illustrates each theme with an example.

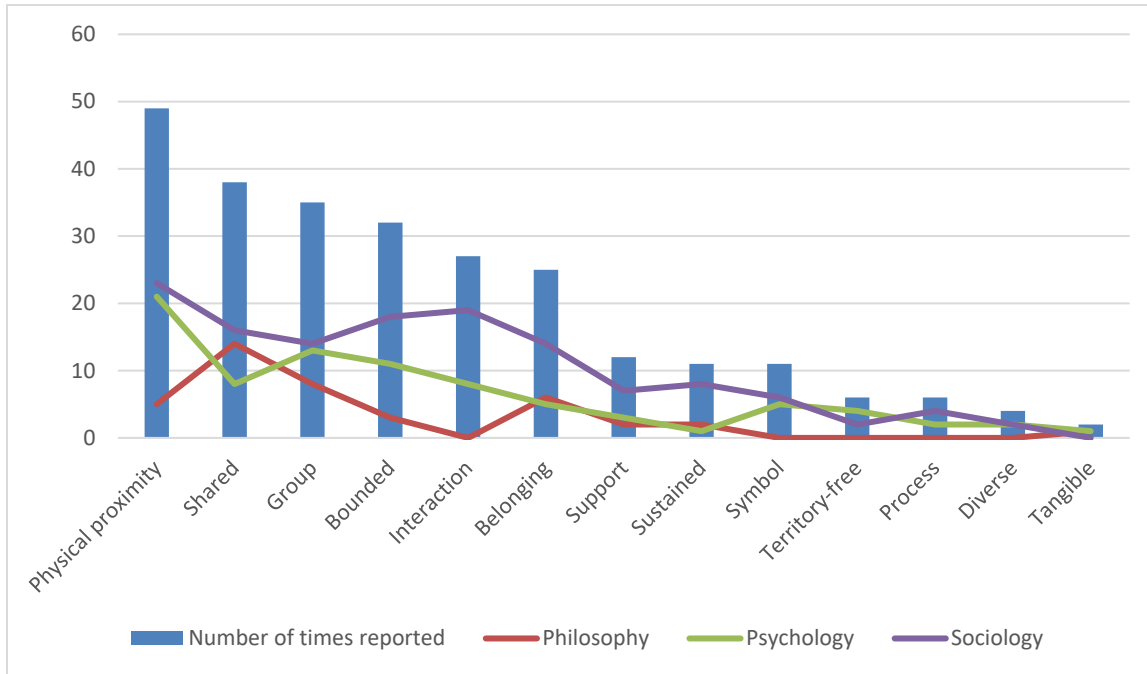
Table 1. Examples of existing definitions of “community” by identified themes

Themes	Examples
<i>Physical proximity</i>	<i>“There are communities that are defined primarily by the territorial dimension, as in the case of neighbourhoods...” (Capece & Costa, 2013)</i>
<i>Shared</i>	<i>“Communities are comprised of those with whom we share the same values, beliefs, and worldviews...” (Bettez, 2013)</i>
<i>Group</i>	<i>“Community was defined by a small group of friends...” (Lehavot, Balsam, & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009)</i>
<i>Bounded</i>	<i>“[C]ommunities are often defined as much by who they exclude as who they include... (Stone 1992)” (Bettez, 2013)</i>
<i>Interaction</i>	<i>“Wilkinson (1991) suggested that community should be defined by placing primacy upon the field of interaction.” (Nieckarz, Jr., 2005)</i>
<i>Belonging</i>	<i>Community refers to the development of bonds between a group of people... or feeling a sense of unity with one’s co-workers.” (Vogl, 2009)</i>
<i>Support</i>	<i>“If community is defined as support, then presumably what these women are yearning for is help during times of hardship.” (Rothblum, 2010)</i>
<i>Sustained</i>	<i>“We will use the term ‘community’ to refer to any group which is able to maintain itself in this way.” (Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 2007)</i>
<i>Symbol</i>	<i>“The ‘community’ concept is a socially constructed symbol that expresses boundaries (A. P. Cohen 1985; Gusfield 1975)” (Ven, T. V. 2005)</i>
<i>Territory-free</i>	<i>“... Theodori (2005) distinguishes between territory-free communities (groups of people, i.e., “the Internet community”) and territory-based communities.” (Amsden, Stedman, & Kruger, 2011)</i>
<i>Process</i>	<i>“The community—defined as a place-oriented process of interrelated actions...” (Theodori, 2005)</i>
<i>Diverse</i>	<i>“A group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties...” (MacQueen, 2002)</i>
<i>Tangible</i>	<i>“[C]ommunity is therefore at once a lived experience and a tangible entity...” (McClellan, 2011)</i>

Physical proximity was most often discussed in terms of neighbourhood and geographical location. The notion of community as something **shared** was reported in terms of shared ties, common interests, and common identity. Definitions touching on **group** referred to a group of people, a network, a clan, or nodes. **Bounded** was used for definitions that mentioned the boundaries that separate the members of a community from those who are not (e.g., age cohort, religious or intellectual tradition, or employment status). Definitions that included mention of some sort of **interaction**, for example, working, social interaction, or engaging, were also noted. **Belonging** refers to definitions specifying feelings or a sense of commitment, belonging, or unity. A number of definitions mentioned that community involved **support**, such as solidarity, cooperation, and help. Segments that discussed community in terms of preservation, managing the clan, and ability to maintain itself were grouped under the theme **sustained**, and emphasize that, for a community to survive, it needs to be managed and preserved; it does not simply exist because a group of people come together. Community as a **symbol** was also common, and consisted of segments describing it as a conceptualization, theoretic construct, or a titular concept. Some definitions suggested community as being **territory-free** – for example, web-based or virtual communities. Community as a **process** was reported. Here, community was referred to as being elastic, and in a constant state of changes. Community as something that is **diverse** was also noted, though with less frequency. Included here were segments related to community as covering a wide range of situations, holding a variety of contradictory meanings, and diverse social practices. Finally, the issue of community as being something **tangible** was noted in two segments (i.e., tangible and that precedes and makes possible any concrete formation or organization).

As shown in figure 2, definitions more often touched on elements related to physical proximity, shared, and group, though bounded, interaction, and belonging were also common. The frequency of themes varied across disciplines.

Figure 2. Number of times themes were reported in definitions, overall and by discipline

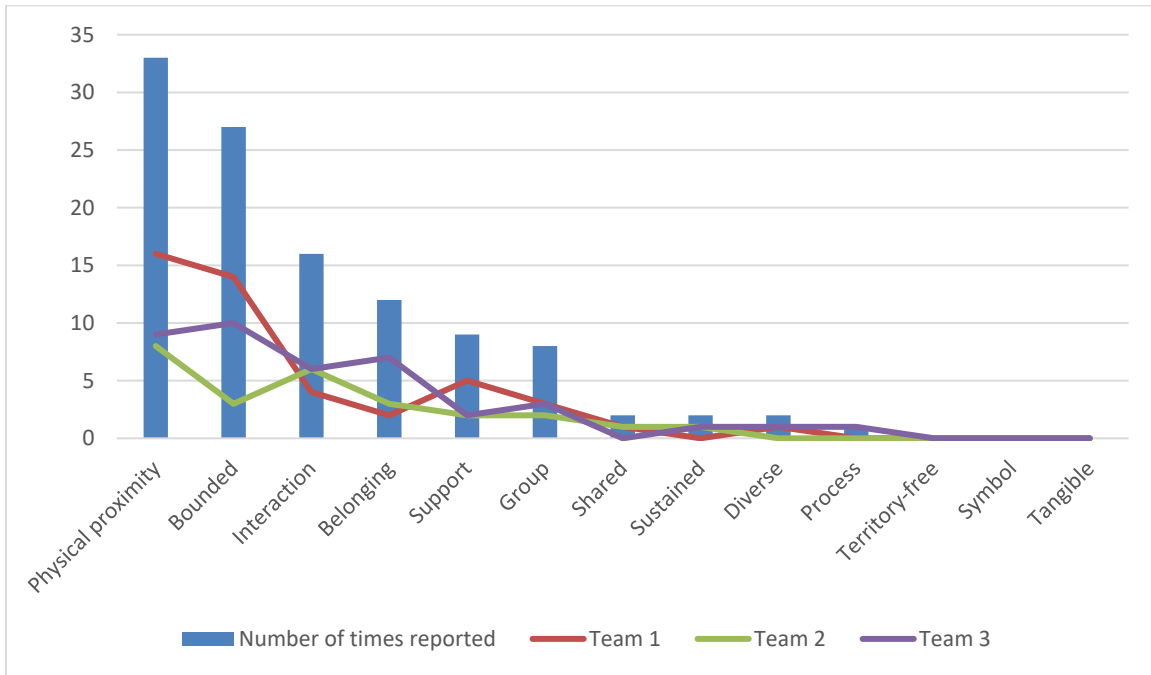


Note: A total of 66 definitions were extracted, but some themes were reported more than once in each definition.

Focus groups

The 13 themes identified in the analysis of peer-reviewed studies formed the basis of analysis of the focus group transcripts. Figure 3 shows the frequency with which each theme was noted by the participants.

Figure 3. Number of times themes were reported by focus groups participants, overall and by team



By far, definitions of community that contained segments related to physical proximity and bounded were most frequent, followed by those related to interaction and belonging. Further, each of these four themes was present in definitions given by each of the three teams. Each team also touched on issues related to group and support, though with less frequency. Definitions that included the notions of shared or sustained were mentioned in only two of the three groups, whereas the themes symbol and territory-free were not mentioned in any group.

One individual introduced a novel segment that did not fit existing categories or themes – it related to community members as being **unpaid**: “*the people from church, because of the relationship they have with the participant; they are unpaid to be with him*”.

Discussion

The analysis of peer-reviewed literature identified 13 themes appearing in studies across the disciplines covered. Out of those themes, 7 were reported more often in existing definitions, as well as by focus group participants: physical proximity, shared, group, bounded, interaction, belonging, and support. Although some disciplines concentrate more on some themes than others, the findings suggest that these concepts are core elements in current understanding of community across disciplines. As such, the following definition of community was derived: "A community is a group of people that interact and support each other, and are bounded by shared experiences or characteristics, a sense of belonging, and often by their physical proximity."

A community inherently consists of a group of people. It cannot be established by a sole individual. For instance, geographical location (e.g., neighborhood) is often a common element to various definitions of community (Miller, 2011; Sampson, 2001; Vaughan, 2011). Physical proximity was the most frequently reported theme in the reviewed literature and the focus groups. Researchers often focus on proximity as a necessary attribute which bounds people in their communities (Parsons, 1960; Sampson, 2001). Furthermore, in studies where participants were recruited to define community in their own words, many of them defined it in terms of physical proximity (Ragin et al., 2008; Rothblum, 2010). It has been long established that people in close proximity are more likely to form interpersonal relationships (Newcomb, 1960; Ebbesen, Kjos, & Konecni, 1976). However, more recent studies show that communities are not necessarily bounded by geographical proximity (Baker & Ward, 2002; Gochenour, 2006; Moje, 2000). Gochenour (2006) acknowledges that people are beginning to conceive the concept of territory-free communities unbounded by physical location. Recent studies define community in two ways: based on geographical location or independent of location (Hall, 2009; Rodriquez,

2013; Theodori, 2005). Virtual spaces (i.e. internet-based social groups) are providing a new opportunity for people to engage with others and form territory-free networks (Wellman, 2001). Nevertheless, the results demonstrate that location remains an important notion to the concept of community today.

Regardless of the territorial location of the members of a community, the relational dimension is essential to the existence of a community (Capece & Costa, 2013; Prezza et al., 2001). In several studies, people defined their community as the place where they work, participate, and interact with others (Hall, 2009; Pooley, Cohen, & Pike, 2005; Rothbulm, 2010). For members to be bounded to their community, they need to interact with each other and develop a sense a belonging; a subjective feeling of value and respect that results from a reciprocal relationship based on shared experiences, beliefs, or characteristics (Mahar, Cobigo, & Stuart, 2013). Moreover, people are more likely to form relationships with peers who have similar characteristics (Morry, 2007). Consequently, community is frequently defined as a group of people who share attributes (Dunning, 2009; McClellan, 2011; Nieckarz, 2005; Singer, 2006; Theodori, 2005). However, the findings of this study indicate that communities can also be diverse; it was reported in two out of three focus group discussions.

In addition, members of a community need to support each other in a reciprocal manner. During one of the focus groups, one individual brought up the issue of community as being comprised of people who are "unpaid" to provide support. The statement suggests that paid versus unpaid support is perceived differently: paid support might be perceived as artificial, or not as naturally occurring as those emerging from close social ties. Natural supports (e.g., friends or family) are known to be important for the promotion of physical and mental health, community involvement (Bloom, 1990) and sense of belonging (Collins, 2015). Dunbar (2015)

has also explored the importance of the structural aspects of social networks, and notes that the quality of these relationships are determined by a number of factors (e.g., frequency of contact, shared interests, kinship); efforts to develop and maintain natural supports need to take these into account.

Though infrequent, some studies defined community as an elastic process (Collins, 2009, Pooley et al., 2005) that needs to be managed and maintained in order to survive (Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 2007; McClellan, 2011). This indicates that community is not formed at a single point in time, but instead requires collective action and participation over time (McClellan, 2011; Nieckarz, 2005). Community was also at times viewed as a tangible entity. For instance, if a person defines their community by the place where they live, then their neighborhood is the tangible representation of their community. Conversely, symbols, such as shared rituals and language, may define membership to a community.

Compared to Hillery's (1955) results, this review allowed for a more detailed description of the group of people forming a community. While a unifying definition was proposed, it is important to remember that community is at its core a personal experience of belonging to a group; therefore, definitions of community are relative and grounded in a specific context (Mahar et al., 2013). As such, researchers should clearly articulate their definition of community and recognize the limitations imposed by a particular definition (Moje, 2000).

Limitations and future research

The results of this study led to the identification of a number of themes from which a unifying definition of community was derived. However, the review of the literature was not systematic or comprehensive, and may have missed other existing definitions of community. As

a result, it is possible that other aspects in defining community were missed. The study is also limited by the relatively small number of individuals involved in the focus groups. The results reported here do not necessarily represent the perspective of all individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and planning teams. Saturation was not reached as a new segment emerged in focus group discussions (i.e., **unpaid**); consequently, it is likely that additional themes would emerge from further research. Further exploration of community as composed of persons who are unpaid is also warranted, especially as a key focus in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities is to build the person’s natural– or unpaid – support network. That the literature and focus groups were conducted entirely in English also limits generalizability of findings. It would be important to further explore themes to the definition of community with diverse populations, as people from different cultures view and perceive the world in different ways (Nisbett & Masuda, 2003).

Conclusion and Implications

This study offers the following unifying definition of community: “A community is a group of people that interact and support each other, and are bounded by shared experiences or characteristics, a sense of belonging, and often by their physical proximity.” This definition could be used by researchers to inform development of measures of community to assess and evaluate practices and policies aimed at building inclusive communities. In doing so, it will be important that measures not rely solely on objective items, but also the subjective experiences of belonging and reciprocity in relationships with others (Lysaght, Cobigo, & Hamilton, 2012; Martin & Cobigo, 2011).

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