

## When Participants Embody the Answer: A Narrative Case Study of Community Leadership

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### ABSTRACT

*Community leadership has been studied for decades, yet more still needs to be understood about its development among members of an area. While scholars can investigate phenomena from various methodologies and disciplines, there are other methodologies that can help researchers delve deeper into understanding a concept such as this. Narrative case study research with an emphasis on counter-narratives and embodiment is one way to understand community leadership. Through this single holistic narrative case study, I examined how community leadership developed in a low-income and segregated community. The findings of this study focus on four main areas: (1) care work with subthemes such as community leadership among church members and community members, (2) entrepreneurship, and (3) embodiment of the counter-narrative. The insights from this article serve as a way for scholars to identify the emergence of counter-narratives, as well as ways in which counter-narratives can help others learn about community leadership.*

**KEYWORDS:** Community leadership, counter-narratives, embodiment, narrative case study

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Counter-narratives or counter-storytelling within narrative inquiry has existed since the mid-1900s (Miller et al., 2020). Stemming from marginalized groups telling their histories and experiences, these alternative stories provide a competing truth to the dominant narratives circulating through media, literature, art, and more. Over time, this methodology of providing an alternative story spread through various disciplines, adding validity and variety to qualitative inquiries. Counter-narratives are gaining popularity in professional disciplines and social sciences such as leadership studies, especially when scholars recognize the diversity of leadership experiences, performances, and development.

Along with counter-narratives, embodiment is another area of study that has gained influence in research fields. Understanding that people use their bodies and emotions to express and understand their own human experiences, this phenomenon also progressed through the physical and social sciences. Within leadership studies, scholars study the role of embodiment as a set of mind, body, and spiritual experiences that influence one's ability to guide others and self-reflect on their positions (Ropo et al., 2013; Waite et al., 2014). By merging embodiment and counter-narratives or counter-storytelling, researchers can further understand how a methodology

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emerges, not just through one's voice but also through one's actions, as I explain in the following narrative case study.

The city of Hudson (pseudonym), located in the southeastern section of the United States, encompasses a historic area that has not always held a positive past. This area, known as The Loch (pseudonym), has had a reputation for poverty, crime, and consistently illegal activity. At least, that is how some journalists have described the area (Walker, 2012). Contradicting, The Loch has also had a reputation for strong political and civil rights leadership since the early 1900s (Gray, 1991). A predominantly African American community, this area within the city of Hudson has vacillated between two narratives, as it was birthed in the early 1900s, expanded through the Civil Rights era, and survived rezoning, redistricting, and gentrification (Cruise, 2011; Oppermann, 1994). The people of this area have repeatedly worked to change the narrative of their community over the years. A few articles present the positive side of the community, along with the contradicting history that surrounds it (Luck, 2011; Walker, 2007, 2012). Newspaper articles written by Collins (2000), Farmer (2000), and Walker (2006, 2007, 2012) seem to be the only articles where residents and former residents were interviewed, compared to articles where residents were omitted. The resounding narrative from newspaper articles was that no one in the community felt they were poor growing up. In fact, it seemed the community contained caring members and a safe environment similar to other neighborhoods, even if the economic and political levels differed. Within the newspaper clippings, residents shared their own memories of growing up in The Loch: "When you think about [The Loch], you don't have anything to be ashamed of" (Walker, 2007, p. 16); "This was the best place in the world to grow up" (Walker, 2007, p. 16); "It was one village. Everybody was your mama" (Walker, 2012, p. 8); "Everybody loved everybody, and everybody took care of everybody" (Farmer, 2008, p. 25); "Nobody bothered nobody . . . We never locked doors . . . If you ran out of sugar, you could just go in there (a neighbor's house) and get what you want" (Collins, 2000, p. 10).

One article describes The Loch as "a bustling, vibrant and close community with a variety of stores, shops, and businesses, where almost every[one] knew each other" (Family holds annual reunion, 1994, p. 9). Walker (2006) states that "it was one of the city's most progressive black neighborhoods. Black-owned businesses lined the streets, and many families owned their homes" (p. A15).

A predominantly marginalized area due to racial and class segregation, as well as political challenges, The Loch community members worked hard to care for one another in order to make positive societal and political changes. As a result, a community of caregivers, businessmen and businesswomen, pastors, activists, educators, doctors, and others emerged (Gray, 1991). However, in spite of this positivity, the dominant narrative of the area remained negative as the city worked to revitalize the community and its surrounding neighborhoods. This information helped me establish my research question, which I developed from my own counter story based on my prior knowledge and initial readings of the area. In an area that was described as a place of poverty and crime, there remains proof that community leaders in the form of entrepreneurs, educators, ministers, doctors, and civil rights activists emerged. Therefore, the research question that guided this study was: How were community leaders cultivated within The Loch community, especially during the time range of 1960-2000?

The purpose of this narrative case study is to examine ways in which counter-narratives help researchers learn about leadership concepts, such as community leadership development, by focusing on the ways in which marginalized research participants embody and display the counter-narrative.

## Literature Review

### Counter-Narratives or Counter-Storytelling

Counter-narratives combine critical theory and discourse theory, in particular, critical race theory (via the counter-narrative), critical feminism (via the counter-story), and narrative inquiry (Miller et al., 2020); however, counter-stories and counter-narratives can be used interchangeably. Informed mainly by critical race theory (CRT), counter-narratives or counter-storytelling have been used as forms of resistance by marginalized groups against dominant views (Lechuga-Pena & Lechuga, 2018; Miles, 2019; Miller et al., 2020). Within feminism and critical race theory, the counter-narratives can be thought of as stories of resistance, which are lived experiences of strategic defiance in order to bring about freedom (Norkunas, 2004). In this case, resistance is about achieving justice through the oppressed stories of others. Counternarratives are not simply about presenting an alternative truth but about social change, as presenting alternative truths and alternative ways of knowing leads to possible changes in the way concepts are taught and policies and practices are implemented (Miller et al., 2020; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-stories challenge power dynamics by voicing a different history as true as the main narrative.

Within the social sciences, narratives have been used to challenge power dynamics, especially historical accounts by majority groups. Miles (2019) argues that through the lens of CRT, dominant narratives have been promoted to keep marginalized groups oppressed by repeating a controlling ideology that soon becomes accepted by many. Counter-narratives/counter-storytelling “intends to dismantle overlearned, reductionist, and oppressive representations of marginalized people while offering balanced and more complex accounts of experience” (Maxwell & Sonn, 2020, p. 48). The dominant narratives are often unchallenged and accepted as common and fully true, whereas counter-narratives tell an alternative truth that might need some convincing.

While not all counter-narratives are critical and resistance-focused, some can be, especially from the people telling the stories (Gislason et al., 2018). These stories tell a different side to a dominant story that has circulated often until it is accepted without question. With intention, counter stories can do the following, as emphasized by Solorzano and Yosso (2002):

- (a) They can build community among those at the margins of society;
- (b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems;
- (c) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and
- (d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer . . . (p. 36)

Often, counter-stories come from Indigenous groups, racially minoritized groups, women, LGBTQ communities, and other marginalized voices often ignored due to power differences (Gislason et al., 2018; Henriques et al., 2022). These narratives occur through various mediums, such as oral storytelling, art, performance, dance, literature, and more, and may involve the co-construction of knowledge. Different from majority narratives, counter-narratives such as understanding leadership through the voices of Lakota women (Gambrell, 2016), African American women in higher education (Richardson, 2023b), or even understanding episodes of hypervisibility and invisibility (Dickens et al., 2019) combat what leadership looks like for marginalized groups. The counter-narratives showed that marginalized women leaders, different from male marginalized leaders and white male leaders, experienced challenges in how others perceived their leadership styles. These challenges caused the women to remain aware of how they

were perceived. Still, all perform leadership differently from their counterparts, thus revealing that actions such as leading and managing look different depending on who performs them.

### **Constructivism of Knowledge**

Constructivists, through the constructivist framework, suggest that people construct knowledge and make meaning by reflecting on their own experiences and even the experiences of others (Bodner, 1986; Kumar, 2011; O'Connor, 2022); however, there is no agreed-upon definition of constructivism by scholars. Through experience, social discourse, prior knowledge, and new information, people can create new knowledge instead of passively absorbing it (O'Connor, 2022). Through one's life-long experiences, memories, and reflection, knowledge construction (prior and acquired) occurs over time, aligning with one's reality. Gradually, these meaning-making moments revise and expand as reflection reoccurs and new knowledge is gained (Bodner, 1986). This knowledge is tested through reality and the experiences of others. Naturally, it should align with reality for validation and usefulness to the one constructing the knowledge (Kumar, 2011).

However, there are some issues with the constructivist framework. One's memory and meaning should align with reality, but the one holding the memory cannot say that said memory is entirely based on reality, as memories have some flaws within processing (Audi, 2010). This could occur through avenues such as being tied to an emotion, which could distort one's meaning-making experience (Audi, 2010; Dirks, 2008). Also, one's construction of knowledge may not be based on the most helpful experiences; therefore, there could be a misunderstanding of one's concept of knowing (Bodner, 1986). As a result, the validity of one's knowledge via triangulation can confirm the examined research. Researchers can validate answers collected from interviews with a combination of historical documents, artifacts, photographs, articles, and more (Verleye, 2019). Studying community leadership development through triangulation of materials and counter-narratives helps confirm understanding of it.

### **Community Leadership**

Community leadership is a model used to describe people who represent, speak for, and/or advocate for the community in which they reside. This is not to be confused with community leadership via agencies or nonprofit organizations that financially support socially responsible causes (Ridzi & Prior, 2023; Strawser, 2022; Wu, 2021). While agencies that provide financial resources for community improvement have been in existence since the early 1900s (Wu, 2021), this study focuses on community leadership from the perspective of individuals who are organic to the community in which they reside, working with others to enhance the area in which they live.

Community leaders, in being attached to their place of community, not only connect with the physical aspects of a town or city but with the social and cultural aspects as well when engaging with community members (Grocke et al., 2022; Maylor, 2020; Nicholson et al., 2022). Early studies on community leadership did not always focus on the different ways that leadership could form but more so on leadership from a title or power-structured position (Bonjean & Olson, 1964). Over time, views of what constituted a community leader and the purpose of community leadership were enhanced. As Evans (2012) stated, "Community leadership is praxis action informed by practical wisdom and theory that is consciously reflected in order to generate learning and new action" (p. 2). While community leaders can be those elected to positions, they often encompass people who are not elected to any particular position yet are well respected and have enough influence to shape and shift the community they represent (Grocke et al., 2022; Lamm et al., 2017; Lind & Ekwerike, 2022). In short, these leaders may also be referred to as change agents, their

mission being to enact positive change for the betterment of society. Community leaders can come in many forms, such as ministers, educators, law professionals, doctors, and business owners, to name a few (Goris et al., 2015; Liu & Han, 2023; Maylor, 2020).

“Towns play a vital role as a place for social interaction, a place to generate and activate social capital, and a place to anchor personal and social identity” (Grocke et al., 2022, p. 299). Community leaders are equipped to provide a unique perspective related to the needs of the population within an area; however, they do not hold all of the knowledge. While there may be community leaders within a population, this is a shared, collaborative leadership role, as the rest of the community population is encouraged and charged with bettering their communities and supporting those who may speak or act on behalf of the population. “Community leadership, through interactive feedback processes with followers, contributes to empowering local people, delivering public services, and solving local problems based on local initiatives” (Liu & Han, 2023, p. 860). It seems that there is much for community leaders to do, such as advocating, organizing, inspiring, strategizing, and building relationships in order to be effective in navigating change (Bonjean & Olson, 1964; Lamm et al., 2017).

Different patterns of community leadership occur in different communities according to their makeup (Bonjean & Olson, 1964). A large part of community leadership is recognizing and knowing the culture of the community and then working to advocate for the needs of the people. This includes not only people who are living but also those who came before in order to honor the history of said community (Nicholson et al., 2021). Community leaders of marginalized groups/areas may embody a communal uplift within their leadership approaches, as a communal uplift of people, resources, and outcomes may also be viewed as a form of social justice and resistance (Maylor, 2020). The idea behind enhanced community leadership is that leaders are everywhere, not just those in influential positions. Working together to solve communal and societal problems, community leaders often volunteer their time towards the betterment of society (Bono et al., 2010). These change agents often use a mixture of collaboration and integrative community leadership approaches to engage with other citizens. Some even join community leadership programs (CLPs) to learn more about their city in order to serve as better change agents.

Due to changes in demographic and societal makeup following the Civil Rights movement, CLPs and models such as integrative leadership emerged (Bono et al., 2010; Wituk et al., 2005). These programs, which incorporated aspects of leadership such as collaboration and democratic methods of leading, were used to develop community leaders working towards a common goal or mission since the late 1980s, and they often derived from movements by marginalized and Indigenous communities (Moore, 1988). Recipients of these programs then used the skills they learned to lead in their own communities; this leadership modeled similarities to what occurred, often authentically, in the early to mid-1900s in communities such as The Loch. The results of studies on community leadership showed that community leadership was not to be viewed as a formulaic model but one that adjusted based on the description and needs of the community (Liu & Han, 2023; Maylor, 2020; Nicholson et al., 2021). Therefore, community leadership will continue to evolve and even incorporate other forms of leadership to make it more effective.

## **Case and Methodology**

I used a narrative case study methodology for this study, specifically focusing on the counter-narrative or counter-story, which can be used interchangeably. Narrative case studies merge two qualitative methods: narrative inquiry and case study research. Because I focused on one community (i.e., single holistic case study) within a particular location and had access to various community artifacts, I identified the first approach to my research as case study, with The

Loch community serving as the case or point to be studied. The case study allows researchers to examine a phenomenon within a specific time and space, and they may also be historically based (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Schoch, 2020). It also allows researchers to capture various types of data, such as interviews, photographs, newspaper articles, surveys, and other documents, which provides researchers with an in-depth description of a process or phenomenon (Sunday et al., 2020; Verleye, 2019). This methodology assists researchers in answering questions and learning comprehensively by analyzing a specific place or organization deeply (Schoch, 2020). Within this study, I focused on a single case study instead of a multi-case study. Therefore, I had to decide on the case and what/who would and would not be included in this study. I then merged this method with narrative inquiry, specifically focusing on counter-narratives.

Through narrative research, scholars reveal new ideas and theories by telling the truths of others, using their stories as guides (Andrews, 2021); however, the counter-story or counter-narrative tells an alternative truth from an often marginalized perspective. Narrative researchers take tales about a historical moment in time or across time as participants remember the moment; then, storytellers (i.e., researchers) write about those moments from a particular theoretical or conceptual framework (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Nobe-Ghelani, 2018). This form of inquiry, encompassing the counter-narrative, seeks to make meaning of people's lived experiences, often from the position and identity in which participants convey the story (Estefan et al., 2016). It is important for narrative, especially counter-narrative researchers, to understand how participants construct their stories so the researchers can retell those narratives to audiences from a particular lens (Hickson, 2016).

Narrative and counter-narrative research focus on sense-making and co-construction between the researcher and storyteller (i.e., participant; Coly et al., 2024). Through sense-making, the participant uses his or her own identity, experiences, and knowledge to make sense of their stories (Dervin, 1998); through co-construction, the researcher collaborates with the participant in interpreting and making meaning of the connecting experiences (i.e., co-constructing). From a social justice or critical theory view, the counter-story may portray itself as a story of resistance in which the marginalized participant overcomes barriers or challenges. Marginalized groups, giving them the opportunity to present a different perspective on a topic (Maylor et al., 2021), often tell counter-stories or counter-narratives, as these are hidden truths removed from the dominant narrative. At times, the researcher may also have a counter-story, forming the basis of their research interest.

### **My Counter-Narrative/Counter-Story**

Counter-stories not only come from the lived experiences of others but from personal stories that differ from the majority narrative (Merriweather Hunn et al., 2006). My own counter-narrative of spending a considerable amount of my childhood in the area I researched for this article served as the foundation for my research inquiry. During my childhood, I spent weekends and various weekdays at my maternal grandmother's house. This was my mother's childhood home, where she later worked part-time with my grandmother as a beautician. Within the basement of the house was my grandmother's hair salon, which she owned until her late 70s/early 80s. While she and my mother worked with clients, I often played outside in the backyard or the neighborhood park with the other children who lived there. On the weekends, my mother would wake me up early, and we would make our way back to the downtown area, near my grandmother's home, to visit the local farmer's market. On Sundays, my family would drive to my mother's home church, approximately five minutes away from my grandmother's home. I listened to the pastor who ministered at the church for over sixty years.

I saw this area as my second home and as a caring, safe, and nurturing community where everyone knew one another and everyone took care of one another with no complaints. Therefore, when I stumbled upon a news article (Tew, 2013) describing The Loch differently from my experience, I was surprised as it countered my personal experience and memories. This led to me searching for more articles about the community, and I noticed a pattern: many articles I read about The Loch described the area and its residents negatively, which differed from my own knowledge about the place. Because of this discovery, I decided to embark on a case study of this area. Therefore, through the constructivist framework, I took the position of the learner, while the participant and the artifacts I collected served as my teachers. I viewed the data through the knowledge of the participants and historical records, which guided my new knowledge construction. While this study validated some of my memories, other memories were reconstructed through the knowledge gained, especially through the process of reflexivity.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is a practice where the researcher engages in critical self-reflection to understand the influence of their own study (Dodgson, 2019; Hickson, 2016). The process involves the researcher capturing an awareness of how they interpret their experiences listening to the stories of others, along with understanding what they bring to the research experience (i.e., their positionality); reflexivity is present in narrative inquiry as well as in case study analysis (Verleye, 2019). Within counter-narratives, reflexivity helps researchers understand ways in which they navigate structures of power while attempting to dismantle them (Nobe-Ghelani, 2018). As a result, one's reflexivity can function alongside the participants' as a story of resistance. Therefore, bracketing, which often occurs in other qualitative methods, may not be reasonable within narrative inquiry or counter-storying (Clandinin, 2006). When practicing reflexivity, I had to remain aware of my positionality as I lived a part of my childhood within the community that I researched and remained immersed in as an adult. Therefore, practices such as journaling helped me remain aware of my biases, but I also included my own counter-narrative within the research as part of reflexivity.

One's reflexivity and positionality should be transparent throughout a research document as they contribute to the context of the research for the reading audience (Dodgson, 2019; Massoud, 2022). Practicing reflexivity and clearly stating one's positionality helps readers make better sense of the research and understand it (Nobe-Ghelani, 2018). Not only did I spend a large amount of time in the area that is the focus of this study, but I still spend time in the area, as it comprises many places that I frequent with my own family and is in the city in which I live. I am close to the families that still exist within the area and have witnessed some of the structural and political changes that have taken place over the decades. The area that serves as the focus of my study has been in existence since before the 1800s, and I grew up learning about the racial, class, and gender dynamics of the historic community, which influenced the continued documented issues of political, financial, and racial segregation that currently exists within the area (Cruise, 2011). Therefore, while I examined this study through the methodology of counter-storytelling and the lens of community leadership, I needed to remain aware of any bias and prior knowledge that I brought to this study, as there was a lot of information that I was not yet privy to. At the same time, while my familiarity with the city and families helped me gain access to information, it did not mean I had full access, as the participant interviewed had full control over what information would be revealed to me.

## Data Collection

To answer my research question, I prepared myself to review documents and artifacts and interview participants. For this research topic, I started by finding historical records which would provide insight into the area, neighborhoods, and people during the period in which my research was narrowed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Starting with the central public library's digital records of the community, I was able to collect archival data, such as newspaper articles in which journalists interviewed people within the area, as well as historical digital photographs. This process of searching and finding artifacts took approximately seven months, as one online artifact led to another. Once I could find no more resources providing insight into the area, I began looking for people to interview. In order to find participants to interview, I established the criteria in the following manner. Participants needed to meet one of the following criteria:

1. Currently live in The Loch community and have lived there since the 1960s.
2. Have lived in The Loch community during the time period of 1960-2000.

The 1960s was a time of civil rights activism and community building across the United States. Over the decades and later in the 1900s, The Loch community began seeing members disperse to suburban neighborhoods along with new construction patterns, further segregating the city (Kang & Froehlich, 2021). While community leaders could still emerge after that time, I wanted to gain an understanding of what the community embodied at the height of community leadership.

To gather participants, I used the snowball sampling method (a form of purposive sampling). I started with seeds or contacts that I knew might be able to recommend participants who fit the research criteria (Parker et al., 2019). Through the digital records, I realized that the churches within the community would be the best places to start, as congregation members might want to speak with me or recommend people I could interview. After obtaining IRB approval, I emailed the pastors of each of the main churches listed in the area since the early 1900s and still existed during the time of this study (approximately eight). I explained my research purpose in the email and provided a consent form for additional questioning. I received two responses: (a) one from a pastor who could not recommend anyone but who did allow me access to their church records, such as photographs, yearbooks, and news articles pertaining to leadership for the period that I was investigating; and (b) one from a pastor who connected me with a congregation member who was once responsible for collecting historical information on The Loch community and surrounding areas within the city. I perused the historical documents that I could access from the first pastor to gain more information about the community from the past. From the second pastor, I was able to connect with the suggested congregation member. This person informed me that most of the people who grew up in the particular area and could provide insight into what I needed were no longer alive; however, there was one person remaining: the former organizer of the reunion committee for that historic area. After receiving this person's contact information, I called the soon-to-be participant (Mrs. Armstrong pseudonym), as this was the only living person who remembered life in The Loch during the time I was researching.

For narrative case study research such as this, where the researcher also attempts to infiltrate a community to gain more information, establishing a connection or kinship is important. Similar to an ethnographic study, a researcher must establish trust within a community in order to gain insight via participants' stories (Emerson et al., 2011). For my research, I was able to do this quickly. Upon calling the participant, she wanted to know if she knew any of "my people" (i.e., family members). Having spent many weekends and some weeknights within the area growing up, I was able to establish a connection once I confirmed who my family members were (i.e., grandmother, mother, aunts, and home church). While I had never met the soon-to-be participant



before, she knew everyone I mentioned in my family, as well as former members of the local church. From there, I could restate the purpose of my research and confirm that I wanted to interview her. The participant invited me to her house without hesitation, and a date was scheduled. It is important to note that this participant needed me to interview her after she finished a client's hair in her hair salon, which she still operated at home. The interview with the participant took place over approximately three hours on a weekend afternoon. The interview was semi-structured, and there were two narrative questions:

1. Can you share with me your experience of growing up in the area?
2. What do you feel influenced the creation of many community leaders from this area?

From there, I asked follow-up and semi-structured questions (Quintela Do Carmo et al., 2024) related to further explanations and clarifications of terms, phrases, and/or contexts of stories. The follow-up questions came from everything that the participant shared in her initial storytelling. During the interview, I vacillated between taking handwritten notes and simply listening. As a researcher, it is important to make participants feel comfortable; therefore, I did not want Mrs. Armstrong to think I was only looking down at a piece of paper and writing notes the entire time. Therefore, I would take notes sporadically and listen intently the rest of the time, ensuring I maintained eye contact (Emerson et al., 2011). There were also times when I needed to take a break from notetaking because the participant shared her own artifacts with me, such as books, t-shirts of The Loch map, maps of the church locations, and a recording of natural disasters that occurred in the area, which she also let me borrow. Throughout the interview, I performed member checking (Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023) to ensure that I was capturing the correct information in the manner that she stated. Following our encounter, I left her house and drove to a nearby park. There, I wrote down additional notes from the interview, which were fresh in my memory.

## **Data Analysis and Coding**

I analyzed the collected data using reflexive thematic analysis. I analyzed the manually transcribed interview from my participant, digital documents, and newspaper articles collected using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which allowed me to create new patterns of meaning from the codes that evolved through my engagement with the data (Byrne, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2006) report that there are five areas of RTA before writing the final report: (1) familiarizing; (2) generating initial codes; (3) generating/searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; and (5) defining and naming themes.

Through familiarization, I read the detailed interview transcript more than once. I reviewed the artifacts that I collected to become comfortable with the collective materials for the coding process to begin. I did this multiple times over a year, as new thematic revelations occurred each time I engaged with the artifacts and counter-story. By actively reading the interview and reviewing the artifacts more than once, I was able to perform initial coding and then re-coding of the data (Schoch, 2020). Through coding and re-coding the interview, I annotated transcript sections into one-word or phrased codes. I did the same thing with the newspaper articles, digital photos, and books and recorded the data into collective codes. This process led me to generate themes and review the themes for accuracy. These themes organically emerged (Byrne, 2022) from the patterns of codes I had as I re-read the transcripts, comparing and contrasting them with historical data from public records (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, I was able to define and name the themes accurately. This process occurred as I checked to see if my original themes needed to be named differently in order to reflect the accuracy and the true result of the codes. Memoing also assisted me with the RTA process, as I noted formerly missed information during the multiple coding

process. The reflexive thematic analysis process is subjective and reflexive, with myself as the researcher taking part in the meaning-making process with the participant’s words (Braun & Clarke, 2019). I created the table below showing the final themes and subthemes that emerged as part of the RTA process.

**Table 1**  
*Themes and Subthemes of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process*

Themes	Description	Subthemes
Care work	Members of the community providing care work for one another in order to meet the needs of the community.	Community leadership via the church  Community leadership among community members
	Advocating for the needs of the community in which one resides	
Entrepreneurship	The Loch members operating their own businesses.	
Embodying the counter-narrative	Community members displaying characteristics opposite from the dominant narrative of The Loch.	

## Results

Between the newspaper articles, books, photographs, and the interview with Mrs. Armstrong, I identified the counter-stories from the dominant narratives about the historical community. Not only did Mrs. Armstrong expand on some of the narratives and counter-narratives presented within the artifacts through her answer, but she also demonstrated how one might embody the counter-story as an answer. The counter-narratives that emerged were care work, care work as community leadership via the church, care work as community leadership among community members, entrepreneurship, and embodying the counter-narrative. Through knowledge construction and counter-narrativism using community leadership as the framework, the answer to my research question emerged.

### Theme 1: Care Work Within The Loch

Between interviewing the participants and reviewing the digital photos, artifacts, obituaries, and newspaper clippings, one theme that emerged was the idea of community care. Community care takes place when people within a close-knit community perform care work for one another in various ways. This can usually be exhibited by women caring for other women and families by providing childcare, meals, protection, and social connection (Fisher & Robbins, 2015; Nieto-Valdivieso, 2022) to others. This can also occur in close-knit communities where everyone ensures that no one lives without their basic needs being met. This theme emerged among artifacts such as documents noting the care families would take in their Sunday church appearance or women within the area baking various desserts so that neighbors and families were fed. Additional historical documents described members saving their monies to build churches (Gray, 2011) and care for pastoral families. Mrs. Armstrong explained the idea of care work within the community as well in her life story:

People helped each other. We did not have much, but we always shared what we had. We did not have the homeless problem that we have today.

We had [wanderers], but they came through, and we fed them hot bread and coffee, and they went on their way. We made sure everyone was taken care of.

While it may not have been possible to ensure that *all* people were taken care of, the participants' sentiment on community care emphasized the idea that the general public in the area had their needs met. If a family could not have their basic needs met, then someone within the community would ensure they had what they needed (i.e., food, clothing, shelter). This was not completed by having a lot of money but by combining resources and networks with others so that no one would be without food, clothing, or shelter.

### **Community Leadership via the Church**

Additional elements of care work came through community leadership via church members and pastors. The black American church has served as a “social, civic, political, educational, and economic institution” (Nguyen, 2018, p. 61) within black communities. It was not and is not uncommon for these community mainstays to provide services to its members and surrounding communities, such as tutoring services, childcare services, pastoral counseling, and even political informational sessions and town hall meetings. Through the church, political advocacy was a stance used by ministers to strengthen African American neighborhoods and schools and advocate for equitable laws and policies (Calhoun-Brown, 2000; DeSouza et al., 2021). Socially conscious pastors and religious leaders often led or helped organize movements for freedom and improvement of life for their members. Similar to churches within The Loch community, churches were often positioned to be central to nearby community members, which alleviated the need to find transportation to Sunday services and special events (Gray, 2011; Swaim, 2008). Mrs. Armstrong confirmed this through her own stories of the ways in which the church ministers and members in her community operated:

Everyone in the area went to one of the [eight] churches, so everyone knew one another. That's how we helped each other. The churches helped one another. Remember that everyone walked back then, so churches were built where people could easily walk to. Our pastors were advocates for us (Black people). They lobbied politicians in the community to get us what we needed, like lights on neighborhood streets and books in schools. Everything we knew came through our churches and pastors. That's where you found out stuff and where you were cared for, and we took care of our pastors and their families. They [pastors] weren't in it [the profession] for the money. They were called [to the ministry].

Through a black liberation ideology, black churches also operated as models of freedom and opportunity for Black community members, mirroring their own culture as a response to the experiences of Black people (Calhoun-Brown, 2000; Nguyen, 2018). While the African American church influenced the well-being of African-Americans, it also contributed to the idea that impoverished communities self-sufficiently held services of support and advocacy via the church.

### **Community Leadership Among Community Members**

Other forms of community leadership came from within The Loch community members. These leaders were role models for others who also performed services (sometimes above and beyond their call) to their neighbors. These trusted members consisted of a local doctor providing services after hours, grocery store owners feeding families when family income was low, teachers

living near the children that they taught and engaging with them after school hours, hair salon and barber shop owners caring for members when they could not pay for services, and more (Gray, 1991). As Mrs. Armstrong explained: “One doctor spent his time in his practice Monday-Saturday. He knew everyone and took care of everyone. He’d give food to families, especially if they were struggling financially.”

When it comes to community engagement and agency, this may have been easier for the community leaders of The Loch because they resided within the community. As a result, certain aspects of community leadership, such as trust development, collaboration, and understanding daily and societal issues, organically occurred because the leaders were always present and able to engage in the dynamics of the area (Judson, 2020). For example, as Mrs. Armstrong confirmed in her storytelling and reconfirmed by Gray (1991), many of the ministers of nearby churches either lived across from, beside, or less than a block away from their churches, which were strategically placed throughout The Loch community so that everyone had a place of worship to attend. In addition, as Mrs. Armstrong demonstrated, many hair salon owners built the salons within their own homes; therefore, their own places of business felt like home to others because it truly was a home. Educators attended the same churches as their students and lived near them, so there was always another caring adult (aside from a parent) who helped steer a child in a positive way. Mrs. Armstrong mentioned in the interview that “everyone took care of everyone else’s children.” Consistently being present, building relationships, constantly engaging with members, and performing agency may not have been as difficult for community leaders during this time.

## **Theme 2: Entrepreneurship**

The Loch was also an area where entrepreneurship and job obtainment flourished. In the early 1900s, it became a place for Black migrants to bring their families for new job opportunities, especially in factories. The prevailing narrative orally as well as within documented accounts (Oppermann, 1994) was that members of The Loch worked mostly in factories; while that was partly true, Gray (2011) and Oppermann (1994) documented a different story, which Mrs. Armstrong and newspaper obituaries also confirmed. Within these documents, people within the community were named as having their own stores, hair salons, lawn care companies, candy shops, traveling grocery stores, and more. Upon viewing the obituaries of some of the people named in Gray’s (2011) book, I was able to confirm that many community members owned their own places of business. Through her counter-narrative, Mrs. Armstrong confirmed that while factory life was common, many people within the area ventured into their own entrepreneurial pursuits and used their funds to further support their families. As she shared:

People saved what little money they earned in factories to start their own businesses. The businesses were usually hair salons, barbershops, and grocery marts. From there and from working at [the factory], people sent their kids to college where the kids became doctors, lawyers, teachers, and ministers. We had a black pharmacist in our area. I even started my hair salon and still do hair.

Historical documents and research claimed that there were fewer work options available to women and marginalized groups in the early and mid-1900s, such as teachers, administrative assistants, house workers, and factory workers (Oppermann, 1994; Richardson, 2023a). However, local public records and additional documents (Abramovitz, 2001; MacLean, 1999; Richardson, 2023a), along with Mrs. Armstrong, confirmed that many were also independent midwives, salon owners, and co-owners of businesses with their spouses. In this way, entrepreneurship was a way to support one’s family, achieve community goals, and provide services to others.

### **Theme 3: Embodying the Counter-Narrative**

This research project also showed ways in which a participant could embody the methodology used by the researcher, such as the counter-narrative. Embodiment is when one incorporates their whole being into an idea or purpose. It is often a way of knowing and being that a person lives out (mind, body, and spirit); therefore, it is reflected in who a person is (Fisher & Robbins, 2015; Ropo et al., 2013; Szelwach, 2020). A way to look at embodiment is the way in which a person performs a value that they hold dear. It would not simply be something that is spoken, such as valuing diverse patterns of thought, but it would be embodied in the person's actions and demonstrations (Zhu, 2023). While I used narrative case study as my chosen methodology, the subcategory was the counter-narrative or counter-story. While the participant (Mrs. Armstrong) provided the counter-narrative through her interview, she also embodied everything that she verbally shared. The dominant narrative about The Loch community was that it was mostly dangerous, desolate, and poverty-stricken. However, the participant's story of a warm and caring community where people had strong work ethics and took care of each other, as well as those in need, was mirrored in the way the participant welcomed me into her home and shared her life with me. She offered me food at multiple points during the interview, allowed me to take her documents home with me to review, and shared her life story as openly as possible. She also embodied ways in which having an advocacy spirit was embedded in the community. Through her story of ministers and families advocating for children and caring for the needs of neighbors, she also spoke as though she was still advocating for and caring for her community by explaining what was important about it. As she mentioned: "Many people in [the city] during that time [1930s-1950s] came from [other states] for tobacco work. My mother always smelled like tobacco after working in the factories, but she always came home and cooked dinner." She also mentioned: "My husband and I bought this house about forty years ago. We have no intention of leaving. I'm still trying to get things done around here [neighborhood]."

She stated this as I looked into her kitchen, which was filled with food ready to be offered to anyone who stopped by for a visit, including me. She and her spouse's dedication to the continued work of advocating for the betterment of their area never left them as a mission and purpose. Mrs. Armstrong is connected to the land, the people in the area, and her history, which informs her knowledge base and way of moving within The Loch and the city of Hudson (Belenky et al., 1997; Knights, 2021; Szelwach, 2020). While she no longer plans the annual Loch reunions, she still holds all the artifacts and documents. She remains ready to tell anyone about her special area in the city, which is now a historical landmark.

### **Discussion**

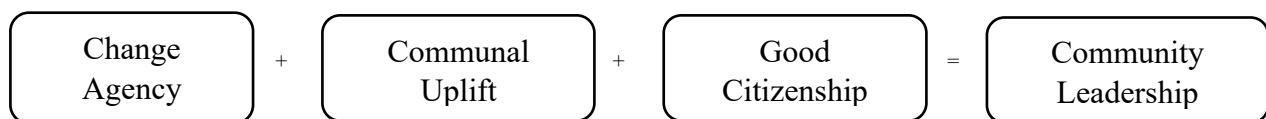
For an area labeled as "one of the worst neighborhoods" within a city (Tew, 2013, para. 6), the participants in this study and additional records show a counter-narrative. The counter-story is a community that blends positive and negative truths and models elements of community leadership to others. Through exhibiting community leadership, this study confirmed that role modeling of certain behaviors and practices, such as community leadership, influence the behaviors of those witnessing said characteristics (Grocke et al., 2022; Posner, 2021), such as care work, which was an important value of the residents of The Loch. As Ms. Armstrong suggested, and as supported by the artifacts, she saw the values of her community displayed in the way her mother and neighbors cared for wanderers, along with the needs of other community members. Seeing this act taught her that being a community leader meant taking care of those in need with the resources that were available.

The results of the study also supported parts of the literature that focused on community leaders in marginalized areas. The stories from The Loch supported the idea of communal uplift and community leadership serving as a form of social justice (Maylor, 2020). With communal uplift, as characterized in the stories told by Mrs. Armstrong and described in the research materials, community members worked with local officials to enhance the upkeep of their neighborhoods and provide equitable resources to neighborhood schools, such as newer books and materials. In this aspect, community leadership was not relegated to one person with a powerful title. Instead, power rested with the people, and multiple members of The Loch community displayed influence. As a result, children (such as Mrs. Armstrong) saw this behavior modeled for them, which contributed to their own view of leadership, work ethic, and community responsibility.

Often, dominant narratives circulate mainstream media, leaving alternative truths out, but investigating the counter-narrative is just as important to understanding a holistic story. Through this research, I understood how a low-income area of town with a negative reputation influenced people to become change agents through their professions, businesses, and work/callings. The residents embodied the work ethic and community values they learned through everyday practices. By seeing pastors educate others on laws and political agendas, as well as provide places of worship to families that were saving their monies to open businesses and send children to college, the idea of community leaders acting as change agents served as a way of life that all community members could emulate. Community leadership, as a whole, represents being a good citizen. With the concept of the good citizen, one chooses to exhibit behaviors and participate in justice-oriented, civic-minded, community-oriented activities and focus on the betterment of others (Buchholz et al., 2020; Pruyers et al., 2019). The other part of being a good citizen is belonging to a community in which to engage and practice elements of community leadership (Villalobos et al., 2021). In this case, change agency, communal uplift (as evidenced by Maylor, 2020), and being a good citizen equated to embodying community leadership, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Illustration of Community Leadership*



*Note.* This figure illustrates the elements that lead to community leadership as shown through the case study of The Loch community.

That idea of community leadership based on the above concepts even influenced how long one stayed in their community, as noted by Mrs. Armstrong, who still lived in the house she bought in the mid-1900s. Remaining in her community allowed her to remain current on the needs of those around her; therefore, she continued advocating for the betterment of others.

Counter-narratives are not only revealed through stories but also the movement of the participant. Within qualitative research, virtual platforms became popular during the pandemic, and scholars have mixed results on whether face-to-face or virtual interviews are better to use (Lobe et al., 2022; Peasgood et al., 2023); however, the studies do not focus on examining a counter-story or counter-narrative. By being face-to-face with a participant, researchers can view a counter-story in action, where participants not only state an alternative truth but model it or act it out with their bodies. In my case, the participant acted out the counter-story through her hospitality and sharing of artifacts to corroborate her reflections. Investigating the counter-narrative is not new to

qualitative researchers. However, there is still more work to complete on ways to continue its validation and importance, especially when sharing the stories of marginalized and oppressed groups.

There are also some limitations to using narrative case study inquiry and focusing on counter-narratives. However, the findings are helpful to those studying community leadership development. While a single case study allows the researcher to delve deep into a concept, the case study in itself is limiting in that it focuses on a single area. Within the single area of The Loch, one participant was available to tell her story of her upbringing. For a narrative, it is not uncommon to have one participant's story, but this made the collection of other data significant for validity. Therefore, I needed to find multiple sources of data collection, such as news articles, published books, digital photos, and articles from the local library, as well as records from local churches. This makes the research a bit more difficult for other scholars to replicate. While it is almost impossible to separate one's biases within narrative research, at times, it is welcomed in the form of honesty, constant reflection, and journaling, which can help researchers identify possible biases. In addition, there is always a possibility of errors taking place. Because, within a narrative case study, a participant's account is based on memory, it is important for researchers to triangulate data in order to report findings and new meanings as accurately as possible.

Finally, the conclusions made about community leadership show one aspect related to this study's particular time and place. Because leadership concepts are continuously evolving, the description and impact of community leadership within this study may not relate to a different population, period, or geographical location. Instead, this study adds to the research about community leadership and how it might be embodied through the actions of those within a community. Based on the results of this case study, some steps can be taken to develop community leadership in others further. As demonstrated by Mrs. Armstrong, leadership was regularly modeled by those within the community; therefore, leadership programs may consider internships and/or apprenticeships where soon-to-be leaders are paired with current ones in order to learn change agency. Organizers of community leadership programs may also want to lengthen time within the program. Some community leadership programs last a year or less, which may not give participants enough time to engage within a community and learn enough about the members, policies, practices, and history (Schoenberg et al., 2021). Lengthening the time to complete a community leadership program and providing more activities for engagement can help soon-to-be leaders develop the knowledge and skills needed to remain successful after the program ends.

## **Conclusion**

Multiple narratives about points in time circulate communities; however, a dominant narrative often occupies the minds of people. This is where an investigation and examination of counter-narratives serve as important ways of learning new material or understanding a community holistically, especially in the case of community leadership emergence. Through merging case study methodology with narrative methodology, scholars may gain insight into how a culture, community, practice, or phenomenon emerges. In the case of this study, I was not only able to understand how community leadership might emerge within one's own environment, but I was able to see how this took place through the way my participant embodied the very story that she described. With this study, researchers can learn not only about community leadership emergence but also the importance of paying attention to their participants' embodiment of the answers that they seek.

## Implications for Community Leadership Researchers

There are various implications to this study that can serve as lessons to others. For example, community leadership is an organic process that can occur via the role modeling of influential community members (Brown & Trevino, 2014). The role modeling of values, behaviors, work ethic, and characteristics such as leadership come from various people. Often, one of the most important forms of role modeling comes from family members, as suggested by various researchers (Brown & Trevino, 2014; Posner, 2021; Richardson, 2023a). While family members are not the only role models that adults may remember, nor do they teach a child everything he or she may need to learn, they are significant for one learning how to lead. Posner (2021) mentions that childhood and work role models are usually the two most named role models by participants, but there are also others. In this narrative case study of community leadership, Mrs. Armstrong focused on role models she remembered from her upbringing.

Through community leadership, influential community members may not hold specific titles, but they may be neighbors, ministers, educators, business owners, parents, doctors, etc. By residing in the community that they advocate for and represent, these leaders have the ability to learn the inner workings of the said neighborhood, allowing them to easily identify and discuss the needs of the members with those in power, such as political influences. The access of community leaders to everyone around them, along with their own experiences, gives them a leadership advantage in helping to solve issues within said community.

This study's implications can help researchers consider community leadership development differently from community leadership programs (CLPs) that may be provided by philanthropic organizations or businesses that specialize in areas of training. This study shows that community leadership can be an authentic, organic process where the power of change and uplift lies with the members of the community represented. This is different from community leaders who represent larger counties or cities but may not live in the particular section that they represent.

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## Notes on Contributors

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